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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

JAN. 13, '40

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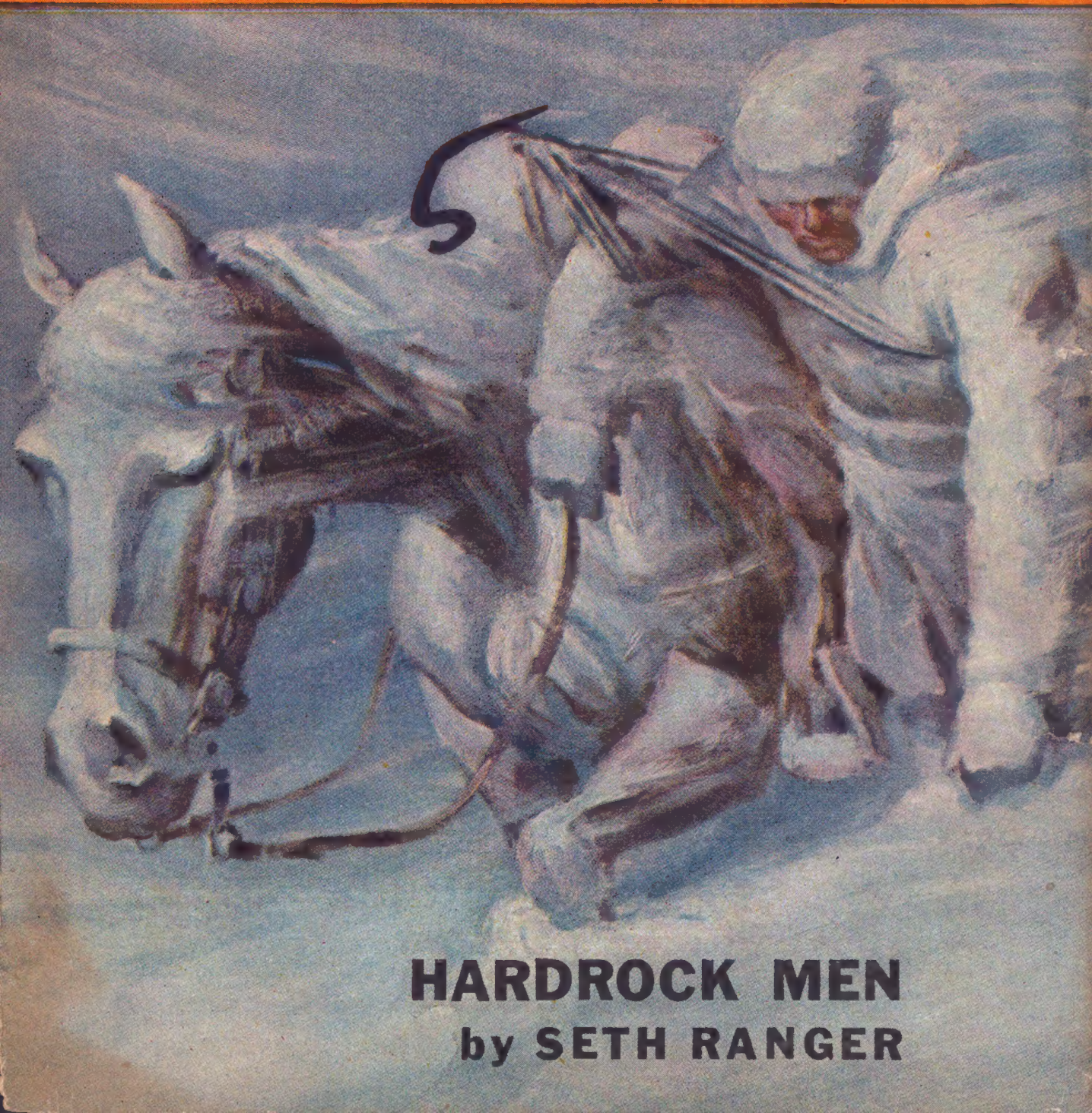

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by SETH RANGER

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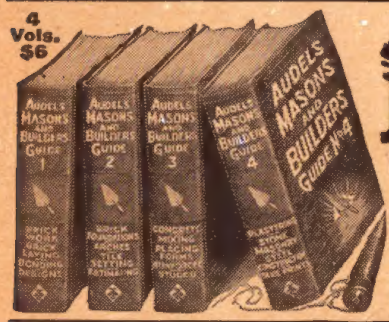

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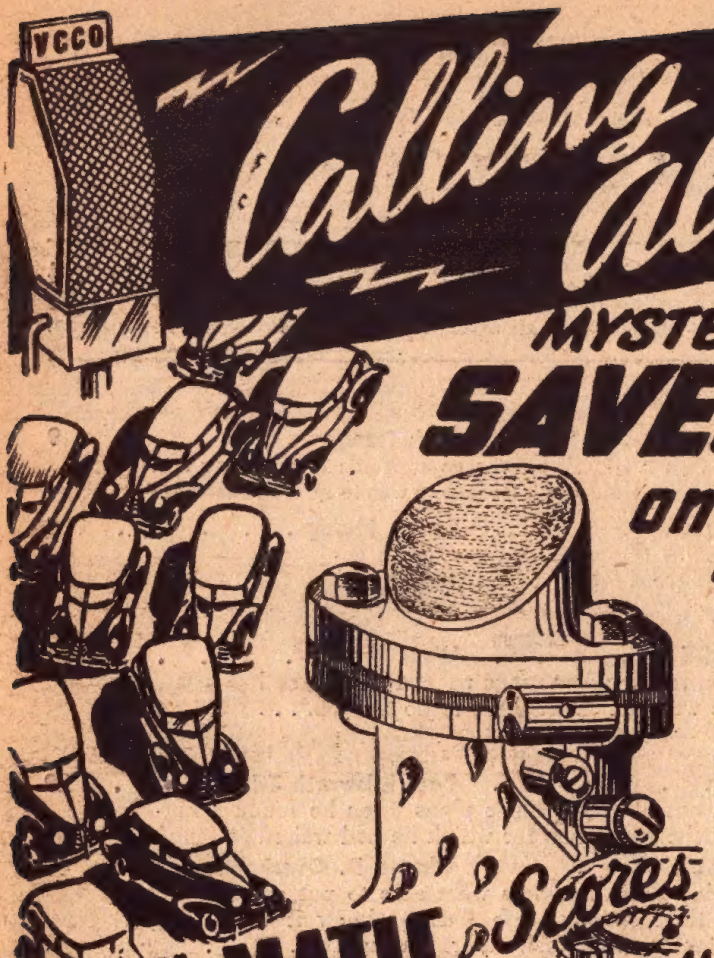

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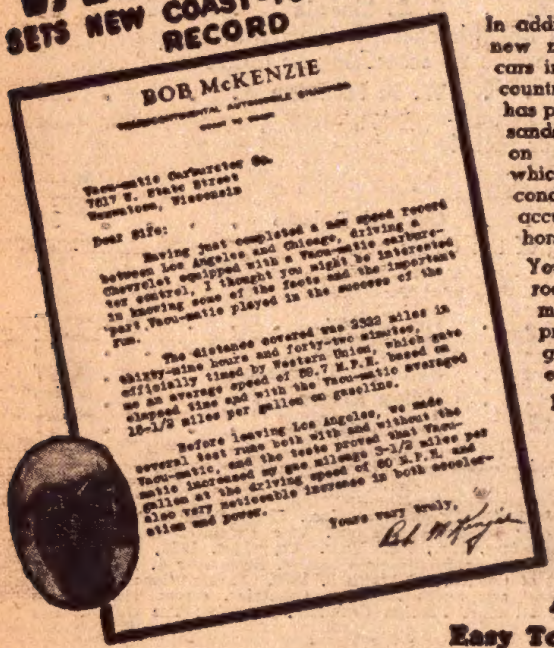

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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COVER BY EDWARD STEVENSON

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The Roundup

We hardly think we can be blamed for giving ourselves a mild pat on the back in light of all the excitement created by the recent bonanza gold strike down Georgia way which, according to the press reports, is a two-inch ribbon of almost solid gold and which was found in an old mine in Dahlonega. Those of you who follow John A. Thompson's articles may recall that the April 22, 1939, issue of Western Story ran a FAMOUS MINING TOWNS article in which it was pointed out that the first frontier gold rush town was not in California, as is believed by most everyone, nor was it even in the West. We quote from Thompson's article: "Recently there has been a revival of gold mining in the South . . . after more than a hundred years of mineral exploitation there is still gold to be won from Georgia's wooded ridges." Pretty neat callin' of the shots on the part of John A., we'd say, and it proves once again that Western Story Magazine's articles are timely, authentic and founded upon reliable information.

While we're on the subject of mines we note a letter from W. F. Totten, of Chico, California, in which he volunteers the information that he reads Western Story Magazine "principally for John A. Thompson's articles, the Mines and Mining department and what few mining stories there are. But I have a suggestion to make," says Mr. Totten. "Why not give us more mining stories and not so much gun thunder and murder? Remember the cow country is only a small part of the West. Do you realize there are thousands of miners and snipers in the West and that every one of them are red-blooded men and women? We get very tired of hell-raising and killing stories. Is that all your authors can imagine to stir the blood?"

We appreciate Mr. Totten's letter and hope he'll enjoy HARDROCK MEN, the new serial by Seth Ranger, which begins in this issue.

As to his criticism of the predominance of physical conflict in our stories, it is our contention that the days of the early West, which period we are most interested in, were naturally days of violence. The rugged frontiersmen and women who sought adventure in new lands had, of necessity, to resort to "Colt law." But this was far from being the most important thing in the winning of the West. These men and women who pioneered were primarily interested in creating new homes and remaking

the perilous wilderness, inhabited by savages and outlaws, into a country where they could follow their various pursuits with a sense of economic security. And until such progress had been made they had, of necessity, to fight force with force in the interests of humanity, justice and peace.

We told you some weeks ago about the studio in which Walt Coburn turns out those stories you all like so much and a letter received in our morning's mail contributes further interesting information concerning this board-and-batten cabin. F. Parker, of Vancouver, Washington, is not only an ardent admirer of Coburn's stories, but seems to think Walt will "do to take along," and we imagine the two of them had plenty fun building this famous workshop. Here's Mr. Parker's letter:

"I have read Western Story Magazine for a good many years and like every one of your writers, but like Walt Coburn best of all. I have a reason, and after reading your write-up of Walt in the Roundup of November 18th, I could not resist writing to you. You see, I built that studio of Walt's. I also helped to build his home at Del Mar.

"Walt wanted the studio to look like a couple of cowpunchers built it for a line shack and, believe me, he got it. The porch leans out over a barranca, as he says, and when we got to putting on the shake roof, there was a Santa Ana wind blowing and Walt was on the roof with me, and wherever the shakes fell we nailed them. I don't think there are two shakes in line on that whole roof. But to both of us it looked swell.

"I built the double bunk in the shack and I believe mine were the first initials carved on same bunk. Built his table out of old 4 x 4 and 2 x 12 lumber, scorched with a torch and wire-brushed. Also cut all coat and hat pegs from crooked limbs out of the brush around the shack. Also built the sand box around the heater.

"I have not been in Del Mar for several years, but your article brought it right before my eyes and the grand little guy who owns it, too. I don't know anything about his mouse trouble but it sounds like Walt all over not to hurt even a mouse. I have had a lot of good times in my life, and some hard in the last few years, but I will always be glad I knew Walt Coburn. I think he not only writes grand stories of the Old West, but actually lives them. So good luck, long life, and many more good stories from Walt, and the same goes for your grand magazine."

In next week's Western Story—

It's been quite a spell since we've had a yarn from T. T. Flynn, but we're sure you'll agree with us that KILLER COME HOME was well worth waiting for. This full-length novel is the fast-paced, action-filled story of a land hog's attempt to gobble up a whole range and the valiant, single-handed crusade waged against him by the man he had turned into a hunted outlaw. We know you'll enjoy it.

Also on the list for next week are outstanding stories and features by S. Omar Barker, Harry F. Olmsted, Norman A. Fox, Wilfred McCormick, Kenneth Gilbert, Gerard Delano and many other well-known Western writers, plus, of course, all your favorite departments.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED — THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

HARDROCK MEN

by SETH RANGER

Part One

CHAPTER I

THE ROAR OF STAMPS

FOUR times a year Jess Reagan got roaring drunk. New Year's (to start the year right), March seventeenth (in honor of Patrick, his patron saint), the Fourth of July (because as a patriotic American he felt the need of due celebration), and Labor Day (because he had worked hard all his life, and any laboring man, it was his opinion, had the right to take down his hair on the first Monday in September.

This was early morning of the Fourth of July and Jess Reagan already had a fair start. He poured himself a glass of rum, opened his mouth and tossed it back into his throat. As the liquor added a little fuel to the flame already pleasantly burning in his stomach, he gave an appreciative, "Ah!" He walked over to the mirror hanging on his office wall and stared at himself.

"Jess," he announced solemnly, "you're lookin' at the best damned man who ever went before the face of a stone. A man who cut his teeth on granite an' sucked sticks of powder instead of his thumb. And that, old boy, calls for another drink."

He tossed off a second glass of rum and walked over to the window. The scene was to his liking. The building was perched precariously on the side of Mineral Mountain. From the window he could see the stamp mill clinging to the mountain's sheer slope; see the mine entrance and the loaded ore cars when they emerged and spilled their burden into the gigantic hoppers. Always, the roar of the stamps, breaking rock, was in his ears. It was the music he loved. And perhaps this was because he had been lulled to sleep from the day he was born, until he went to school, by it. The symphony of steel smashing hard rock, had been in his ears much of the time since then.

Jess Reagan was a man of seventy now, hard as nails, fit as a man half his age. His hair was touched with silver, like frost on charcoal, but his blue eyes were the eyes of a young man.

Crossing to another window, he could see a small locomotive dragging a string of coal cars filled with coal from a mine two miles down Deception Straits.

Nature had left a low grade deposit of gold in Mineral Mountain, then created a coal mine, so that fuel costs would be low and the gold could be mined. Skeptics had said the ore couldn't be worked profitably when it seldom assayed above ninety cents a ton, and sometimes ran below that for months at a time. But one wealthy investor believed Jess Reagan when he said he was the best man who ever went before the face of a stone, and backed him. And Jess had developed the mine.

That man had gone to his reward. Others had juggled the stock, raising it sky high, then sending it plummeting again, but Jess Reagan kept the mill going and the modest profits regular, year after year.

Because Deception Straits were deep, the problem of disposing of tailings had been simple. Conveyors merely spilled them into the water. It was factors like cheap tailings' disposal and low fuel costs, that made operation of the mine profitable. There was something else, too, an eagle eye watching every operation, making few mistakes, and taking short cuts. Increased expenses, mistakes, and taking the wrong kind of chances would have smashed the mine financially in less than a year's time.

Thus, when the normally modest Jess Reagan, celebrated and boasted

he was the best damned man to walk before the face of a stone, few disagreed with him. And some wondered what would become of the Old Glory mine when Jess went to his reward.

Well, Jess had taken care of that. Tim Bradford, a man who spoke and understood his language, and responded to his training, was coming along nicely.

JESS REAGAN walked over to the mirror again. "Well, my fine-feathered cock," he announced to his reflection, "if you're honest, you know you're a liar. You're no longer the best man who ever went before the face of a stone. Tim Bradford's the number one man now. But you can throw out your chest, and preen your feathers, because you made Tim Bradford. But you've got to be careful, and play the cards close to your belly, or the powers that be will be easin' Tim out of the picture and puttin' Ray Turner in his place."

This called for another drink. He filled the glass and lifted it. "Here's to hard luck to Ray Turner, the blasted book miner. May he break his neck the first time he goes below ground!"

Jess Reagan didn't mean that to be taken literally. He wished death or broken bones to no man. But he resented the fact that the new directors of the mine were all for placing men of their own choosing in key positions. Jess didn't give a hoot what school of mines Ray Turner had attended. It couldn't compare with the school of practical experience, from which Tim Bradford had earned his diploma. Besides, hadn't Tim gone down to Seattle and put in two years in the School of Mines at the University of Washington?

Jess looked at his watch. It was only six o'clock, but the sun had been up a long time. Daylight started early and ended late in the latitude of Alaska during June and July.

A plume of steam came from the mill whistle, drifted a moment, then vanished. The mountains, on the opposite side of the narrow straits, picked up the vibrations and hurled them back at Mineral Mountain. And presently the air was filled with echoes.

A sudden silence settled on the scene as the stamps were shut down. Only the rattle of tailings slipping down the conelike dump into deep water broke the stillness. The engines in the steam plant puffed almost silently, supplying just sufficient power to keep the hoists moving.

The mill men, coming off night shift, poured down to the bunkhouses first. Then the miners came, hordes of them from the lower levels. Jess Reagan had followed the vein downward until now his men were working under the straits. Some of them were long in coming up, but he stood in his window watching until the last was out.

The mine did not become entirely deserted. Here and there old men kept the sobbing pumps going, and moved about with a watchful eye. One or two others fed the mules, faithful, well kept animals, that never saw the light of day until they were retired. And retirement for man or mule meant food, shelter, and care. That was Jess Reagan's code. It would be Tim Bradford's code, too, when he took over.

ABOUT to pour himself another drink, Jess put down the bottle when he saw two men coming along the narrow walk that led from the mill to the superintendent's office. "I'll wait," he decided. "A drink

tastes better when another man is helping you empty the bottle."

The two came into the room. Jess greeted Tim Bradford with a nod and said, "Hello, Daylight. How're things?"

"Fine," Daylight Lee answered. "I'm glad to see you lookin' so fine, Jess." A trace of humor crept into his voice. "Yes, and feelin' so fine, too."

An underground explosion had dropped a curtain of darkness over Daylight Lee's eyes almost twenty-five years before. Most men would have retired, but Lee insisted he was a miner and always would be one.

"Give me a chance," he had pleaded, "and I'll keep earnin' my pay. No reason why I can't keep the pumps and machinery below ground, oiled and in shape. In fact, it'll be good business. A blind man won't be wastin' lantern fuel."

Because he insisted he wasn't in darkness, but was in the eternal daylight of the friendship and consideration of his fellow man, he had won an affectionately bestowed nickname.

"I went by the holy of holies," Daylight chuckled, referring to the group of cottages occupied by visiting officials of the company, "but there was no sign of life."

"You don't expect those swells to get up at six o'clock in the mornin', do you?" asked Jess.

"They'd better," Daylight remarked. "I saw quite a number of cannery tenders, fishin' schooners and what-not, comin' up the straits this mornin'."

Actually, of course, Daylight had heard the exhausts of the various craft as their motors drove them through the deep, blue waters. But he rarely admitted his blindness. He invariably talked as if his observation was that of a normal man.

"And," he concluded, "by the time the first bunch of fishermen tangles with a bunch of the miners, there won't be sleep for anybody. I'd like to get into a brawl or two myself, but the old lady would give me the devil when I got home."

He referred to Tess Lee, his wife. She had nursed him when he was injured, and later served as his eyes until he could find his way about with a cane. When he no longer needed a nurse, they drifted apart, then met again, and ten years after his injury they were married. Tess was red-headed, freckled, and homely, by most men's standards, but there wasn't a miner in the region who wouldn't go the limit for her if she had the slightest need of it.

Tess worried a good deal about Daylight's work in the mine. Strong men, with lamps to guide them, sometimes fell into shafts and died suddenly. She couldn't understand how a blind man could find his way about, and so there were certain precautions on which she insisted. If

Daylight took a drink, it must be in his own home. And he must remain there until the effects wore off. Or he could drink elsewhere, providing some friend agreed to see him safely home. And Tess wouldn't permit her husband to engage in rough-and-tumble fights. Obviously, she pointed out, it wasn't fair to the other fellow. No man was going to do his best against a blind opponent. And, besides, she was afraid Daylight might be hurt.

"What's the program, today, Jess?" Daylight inquired. "With some of the biggest stockholders in the company here, we should put on somethin' special."

"I don't think you can beat previous programs," Tim argued. "Plenty of drinking, a few private fights, fireworks, then the annual battle between the best miner and the best sailor or fisherman."

These battles were colorful affairs. At the ringside there would be herring chokers, girls who worked in the herring packing plants; girls from the salteries; whites, Orientals and Indians from the salmon cannery plants. There would be fish trap operators, trollers and gill netters. Before the fight started, the spectators, both girls and men, threw money into the ring. The winner took the pot and split with his teammates.

"Yes," Jess answered, "it's hard to beat that fight, but I'm goin' to have a different kind of a scrap this year. You know, Kirk Turner's the big-biggest stockholder. He came to me yesterday and said, 'I know you're grooming Tim Bradford to take your place. Well, I happen to be groomin' my son, Ray, to take your place, too. I shall expect you to give my son the same kind of a break you'd give Tim.' "

"And what did you say?" inquired Daylight.

"I told him I would," Jess answered. "And I will. I told him, too, it took a special kind of man to run this kind of a mine, because the margin between profit and loss was so close. As a business man, he agreed. I admitted I was trainin' Tim for the job, but I told him I knew that if his boy could develop into that special kind of man, then he'd probably get the job instead of Tim. If he didn't, then Tim would get the job, or the mine would go busted."

"Jess, you're tighter'n a hoot owl," Daylight accused, "but I've never knowed strong drink to affect your thinkin' nor speech. What kind of a bee have you got in your bonnet?"

"One with a stinger, I hope," Jess told him. "Instead of a fight between two men, we'll have a battle royal between fifty."

"You can't do that," Daylight argued. "You might just as well set fire to a bunch of dead firs durin' the dry season and then not expect the fire to spread. They'll be fightin' all over this man's camp. Yes, and far into the night."

"I don't think so," said Jess. "I'm goin' to anchor a barge in Mallard Cove. We'll put twenty-five fishermen an' sailors on one end, an' twenty-five miners on the other, then fire a gun. The last man left on the barge wins."

"Wow!" Daylight exclaimed. "I'm goin' to see that. But what's that got to do with this Ray Turner and Tim?" A couple of seconds later he answered his own query. "Oh!" he said softly. "I see. And, by golly, it's fair, too."

Jess Reagan had been looking out the front window. "I see royalty has emerged," he said, with a nod toward

the cottages, "so I'll go down and outline the day's program."

"And don't forget to tell 'em they're expected to take part," Daylight chuckled. "They're stockholders in Old Glory Mine and that makes 'em miners."

CHAPTER II

CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

JESS REAGAN invited Tim Bradford to go along with him to meet the company officials. "As assistant superintendent," he explained. "I want you to get in on the different angles, learn things as fast as possible. No tellin' what'll happen to a hardrock man. Here today, knockin' at the Pearly Gates tomorrow, you know."

"Doggone it, Jess," Tim protested wrathfully, "I wish you'd quit talking like that. Why, you're in your prime. You aren't going to die for years yet."

"Maybe not die in bed," Jess said, "but a stick of dynamite or a fallin' rock ain't no respecter of age or health. Well, here are our bosses."

Kirk Turner was a pink-cheeked authoritative man with a nose like an eagle's beak and fierce predatory eyes. He was used to having men jump when he spoke, and so he rarely had to contend with opposition. On those rare occasions when his employees so far forgot themselves as to argue, they were instantly discharged. As a result, he was surrounded by yes-men. Ordinarily, this would have weakened an organization, but Kirk Turner was so shrewd in his business dealings, so capable, that he seldom needed the advice of his men.

There was one exception: Jess Reagan. Jess spoke his mind, and where the mine was concerned, he had his own way. When Kirk once said, "Cut wages and expenses, we've got to take a bigger profit out of the mine," Jess had answered, "It can't be done without reducin' the margin of safety. The men earn every cent we pay 'em. In fact, they deserve more, but they know they can't get it, because the mine can't stand it. They're a fine bunch of boys, with sense enough to know there's a limit to the amount of rum you can take out of a bottle."

Kirk Turner had appreciated the logic of this. Nevertheless, he would have enjoyed firing Jess Reagan because the man had never kowtowed to him. For that reason he was training his own son to take over in due time. Now he was pleasant enough as he greeted his superintendent.

"I'd like to have you meet some of the other members of our party, Reagan," he said. "They were so tuckered last night that they turned in as soon as we landed. Miss Sloan's cruiser struck foul weather in the open sea and we all took a battering." He turned to a girl at his side, "Ann, may I present Jess Reagan."

Ann Sloan was a girl whose beauty lay not only in fine, regular features and a lithe, beautifully proportioned figure, but in her blue eyes which had a warmth that was very engaging. Her father had been Kirk Turner's partner. Turner had supplied the money and Sloan had provided the brains, fight, and driving power. Their partnership had resulted in wealth for both of them.

When Sloan died in a Central American jungle, hunting oil, the expansion of the enterprise had ended. Kirk Turner had held on to what he had. Sloan, a shrewd man, had been fully aware of Turner's shrewd, sometimes shady methods and he never doubted his ability to

handle the man. However, he didn't propose to put his only child in the position of matching wits with Turner.

When he died, his estate was placed in charge of the Abbott Trust Co., headed by Morgan Abbott, a hard-headed, fanatically honest banker who had superintended Ann's education and friends.

"I've always wanted to meet Jess Reagan," Ann Sloan was saying. "Dad told me over and over again, that you could do more with low-grade ore than any man in the world."

"Your dad always was generous in his praise," Jess said. "I've had the things to do with, or the mine would have shut down years ago. I'm right glad to meet you, Miss Ann. Last time I saw you, you had cut four teeth. Two above and two below. You tried 'em on my finger, and your mother like to had a fit. She was afraid of germs. But your dad told her I'd just stirred a rum toddy with that same finger and there wasn't a chance of a germ surviving."

They all smiled, Kirk Turner perfunctorily. "My son, Ray," he continued.

THERE was no denying that Ray Turner was handsome. He was solidly built, about five feet ten inches. He had thick, black hair which would have been curly if it were not plastered down with hair tonic. Already he was on the way to becoming the same, domineering man his father was. All he needed was success. Even now there was an aloofness, a certain condescension as he shook hands with Reagan. He tried to cover it, but with poor success.

"I hope to work under you some day, Mr. Reagan," he said.

"I'm always in need of men who have the special kind of stuff that goes with low-grade minin'," Jess answered. He shooks hands and found Ray Turner's hand large, thick, and strong.

There were others in the party, but they were still sleeping, or trying to. The water front was growing noisier with gas boats whistling, the explosion of firecrackers and guns, and the bellows of men already well liquored. A breed had drawn a knife and a mob had thrown him into the straits to cool him off. And such things are never done quietly.

Tim Bradford stood an inch higher than Ray Turner and was about the same weight—a hundred and eighty pounds. But, unlike the other man, Tim's weight was concentrated in his shoulders and arms. He stood five feet eleven inches, but his legs were long and slim; his hips and stomach flat. Turner made no effort to be friendly to the man whom he knew stood in his way, and whom he already disliked. He showed his indifference in his careless handshake.

Tim said nothing. Something had attracted the attention of Ann Sloan and Kirk Turner, but now they were returning and Tim found himself facing the girl, who, next to Turner, was the mine's heaviest stockholder.

"Mr. Reagan's reports speak highly of you, Mr. Bradford," Ann said when she was introduced. She was completely at ease, and put Tim at his ease, too.

"Jess Reagan is over-enthusiastic," he said. "Or maybe he's conceited. You see, he's taught me all I've learned."

"I'd like to go through the mine," the girl said. "When would it be convenient?"

Tim was the last to survive on the barge but giant fishermen and miners fought on in the icy water!

"Tomorrow afternoon?" he suggested.

"That'll be grand," she answered. "I understand we're to see a Fourth of July celebration the like of which we've never seen before."

"The camp will make up in enthusiasm what it lacks in numbers," Tim promised. "No parade, but there'll be contests this afternoon, and if you don't mind, you might judge the water sports—dory races, rope splicing and all that. You own the *Aurora*, and that should qualify you as judge."

"If it doesn't," she answered, "the *Aurora* is fast enough to take me to safety in case the crowd doesn't like my decision. Of course, I'll be glad to do anything. And I'll offer some cash prizes, too, if they don't mind. If I'd known in advance, I'd have brought prizes along."

"The boys will prefer cash to silver cups," Tim assured her. "They can always find something to drink from. The problem is to find the money to buy the drink."

STANDING apart, Jess Reagan watched the two. And he weighed their reactions to each other, weighed them solely from Tim Bradford's standpoint. He loved but one person in the world and that person was Tim. "They're goin' to need each other," he prophesied. "Need each other more'n they know in the years to come. I hope they get along."

Then he introduced Tim to Kirk Turner. Turner shook the younger man's hand and spoke the conventional words, but he weighed Tim Bradford, mercilessly. Again Jess Reagan was watching. "There," he mused, "is a man who wishes Tim was his son. And because he ain't, he don't like him. Maybe I'm wrong about nearin' the end of the trail. Maybe I've just got to be careful. I've got to live until Tim is really set here. I owe it to him. Yes, that's the answer. I've got to be careful." He suddenly realized that Ann Sloan was speaking to him.

Ann laughed when he asked her to repeat her question. "I asked what else there would be in the way of sports," she said, "but you were dreaming."

"Jess is always dreaming," Tim said. "Though maybe that isn't the right word. He's always trying to figure new methods that will cut down waste and lift up profits."

"Water sports this morning," Jess said in answer to the girl's query, "and miners' sports this afternoon, endin' up with a battle royal. Tonight there'll be a grand ball."

"Why don't you young folks take a walk," Kirk Turner suggested. "I want to talk with Reagan."

As soon as the three were out of earshot, Turner's normal attitude toward all men who worked for him became apparent. "As a whole, Reagan, you're doing a good job," he conceded. "But I want a couple of changes."

"You do?" Reagan inquired. "What are they?"

"I don't like a blind man working underground. I want this man Daylight Lee discharged or pensioned."

Reagan guessed it hurt Turner to mention pensioning anyone, but he let it pass. "Lee is safer underground than any man we have, for all his blindness," he answered. "We couldn't fire him because he was blinded while working for us. And I wouldn't do that to a good man, in any event. As to pensioning him, why—"

"He might hurt himself and sue us," Turner argued.

"Hardly. He knows all the dangers of his work and accepts them," Reagan answered. "I've looked up the law. He couldn't sue us, and he wouldn't. Now what's the other change?"

"Bradford," Turner said sharply. "He's got to go. That's an order!"

"All right. If that's the way you feel about it," Reagan answered quietly. "I'll turn everything over to your son, or whoever you want to put in charge, whenever you say."

"I said nothing about your leaving," Turner retorted angrily. "I am talking about this man Bradford."

"So am I. Let me tell you about Tim Bradford, Mr. Turner. He was all set to take up deep-sea divin', workin' for a salvagin' company," Reagan explained. "In time, he hoped to operate his own outfit. And he'd have done it, too. He's that kind. I told him, properly managed, the Old Glory would be runnin' fifty years from now, and maybe longer if new ore bodies were developed. I told him to throw in with me and make this mine his life's work. I didn't exactly influence him, you understand. I pointed out the possible future here and let him decide for himself. Well, he quit deep-sea divin' and he's here. He's saved his money, put it into Old Glory stock and worked hard. I stick to my men when they deserve it, Mr. Turner. And they stick to me as long as I deserve it."

Turner was irritated, but Reagan had given him a way out, and he accepted it, though ungraciously. "I didn't know you'd gone that far with Bradford," he said. "In that case, we'll have to keep him on. Now about my own son, are you going to give him a break, soon?"

"Right soon," Jess Reagan answered, "and I hope he recognizes it."

OPEN AREAS were scarce along Deception Straits. The town itself consisted mostly of one long street. The side streets were steep, beginning at the water and ending against Mineral Mountain. The longest side street was five blocks. Most of them were two or three blocks in length.

Mallard Cove, located on the edge of the camp, provided a ball ground at low tide. Thus, most sports were held when the tide was low. The surrounding banks had been terraced and benches built for spectators.

Daylight had nicknamed it the Clam Bowl, because indignant clams not only squirted water when baserunners galloped around the bags, but sometimes when a runner slid into a base, his spikes gouged out a clam or two. "They have the Rose Bowl, the Sugar Bowl and a lot of other bowls," he said, "so I guess Alaska can have its Clam Bowl."

The name stuck. It was in the Clam Bowl that the various contests were held. The dory races finished in front of the bowl, and the crew from a halibut schooner won first prize. Rope splicing took place in the open space in front of the grandstand, and the gill netters and purse seiners contested in the nearest deep water.

A hush settled down on the crowd when the rock drilling contests were announced. Hard rock had been dumped on the beach in front of the stands, and the various teams lined up for the starter's gun. The announcer identified the pairs, among them Daylight Lee and Tim Bradford.

"A blind man in a drilling contest?" Ann exclaimed. "He holds the drill, of course."

"No," Reagan answered, "Tim holds the drill and Daylight swings the hammer."

"A cheap stunt, if you ask me," Ray Turner said. "Grandstand play. What's the sense of it?"

"What's the sense in any man tryin' to keep up his morale?" Reagan asked sharply. "Besides, it's sport for Daylight. And the prize isn't to be sneezed at, since Miss Sloan sweetened it to the tune of twenty-five dollars."

The gun cracked and Daylight set his feet and gently searched the air until the hammer head came flush with the drill head. Then he began swinging, slowly, light at first, then with increasing speed and strength. Tim, straddling the steel, kept twisting it so the cutting edge would contact different spots in the hole. He poured in a trickle of water from time to time, to aid in the cutting. Slowly, surely, the hole deepened.

WHEN Daylight's strength began to ebb, Tim yelled. The blind man grabbed the steel and Tim began swinging the hammer. Other pairs were driving themselves to the limit. The roar as different groups cheered their favorites was deep and sustained. As a gun cracked, the drillers stopped and the judges measured the depth of the different holes.

"The winners—as usual—are Daylight Lee and Tim Bradford," the announcer said.

He handed Tim the first prize, twenty-five dollars, and Tim gave Daylight half.

"I should think he'd give the blind man all of it?" Ray Turner said. "That's what I'd do!"

"And that would be the wrong thing, Turner," Reagan explained. "You see, Daylight would be insulted if anyone gave him any advantages because he's blind. No sir, he stands on his own feet, and there ain't many around here who forget it."

The tide was now well out and the ball game began five minutes later. The fishermen had a college pitcher in the herring fleet and he blanked the miners while the other deep-water men bunched their hits off the miners' pitcher. At the end of the seventh inning the score stood five to nothing, and the fisherman outfielders were wearing hip boots and the water was two feet deep in center field.

"The game," the announcer boomed, "is called on account of concentrated rain. As soon as the barge floats, we'll have the battle royal. In the meantime, you fishermen choose your twenty-five best men."

The leader of the fishermen and sailors picked up a megaphone. He had a pair of leather lungs and used them. "O. K., you swabs! I want volunteers! Anybody connected with the sea, whether you're a worker, an owner, or a stockholder in some cannery outfit, is entitled to get in on this. I want the pick of the lot. We're goin' to need 'em. And if we get 'em, the fish in Mallard Cove will be eatin' miner steaks for the next hundred years."

"Yeah?" a miner jeered. He started to push his way through to the fisherman, ready to begin immediate hostilities.

The fisherman handed his megaphone to the nearest sailor. "Hold this while I slap that miner down. A couple like him will help me work up a nice sweat for the big fight," the fisherman said. They were finally pried apart and told to save it for the contest.

"All right, you miners," Jess Reagan said. "Any Old Glory man is eligible. This is the chance of a lifetime to show your pals if you've got the stuff. Here's Tim Bradford. Pick your men, Tim."

Daylight Lee and his wife were standin' nearby. Daylight nudged

her. "Did you get what Jess said just now, 'This is the chance of a lifetime to show your pals if you've got the stuff.' "

"I get it, Daylight," Tess Lee answered. "That was an invitation to Ray Turner to show 'em what he's got. Wonder if he's got brains enough to see the chance, and nerve enough to get onto that barge. No reason why he shouldn't. He's a moose of a man."

"Watch Ray Turner's face," Daylight urged. "And tell me what happens. Golly, I'd like to see his expression." It was the first time in years his wife had heard him confess his longing for vision.

"He has a sort of smirk on his face," Tess informed him, "and he's acting as if he wasn't part of all this."

"Which he ain't," Daylight said. "And never will be. You're sure he knows he's expected to get into the fight?"

"Of course," she answered. "Didn't I see the furious look he shot at Jess Reagan. But Tim isn't having any trouble getting men."

CHAPTER III

BATTLE ROYAL

THE water was four feet deep around the barge when the best fifty men in the region were taken out in boats and put aboard. Two of the dories were rowed slowly along the water's edge and the crowd tossed money aboard. Anything was acceptable. Here and there nickels, dimes and even pennies tumbled into the dory, but most of the coins were dollars and halves.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars and some odd nickels and dimes," the dorymen announced after the collection had been counted. "Ten bucks to every man on the winning team."

The crowd cheered as the two sides lined up and awaited the signal. The judges were in small boats near the barge. The barge, proper, was not a safe place for outsiders.

A gunshot started the battle. The fishermen were first to get into action. They improvised a flying wedge and charged straight at one side of the massed miners. It was like slicing off a piece of ham. Six miners spilled into the water, dragging two fishermen with them.

The flying wedge turned and charged again. Tim Bradford leaped the intervening space and crashed his fist against the jaw of the giant Norwegian fishermen who formed the point of the wedge, then backed away in a hurry. The fisherman, out on his feet but supported by companions on either side, staggered and turned the wedge slightly. Tim cracked the second man in line behind the ear as the wedge sliced past. The leader and the second man went down in a heap.

Tim grasped the first man by the slack of the pants and collar and heaved him over the side. As he stooped to pick up the second, a Finn knocked him flat with a flying tackle. They went to the barge deck and began fighting before they stopped sliding.

Tim got his knees up to his chin as the Finn made a second rush. He drove his feet upward, catching the Finn in a stomach well filled with sundry kinds of hard liquor. The man turned an orange-green and fell to his knees. "Bay Jiminy," he gasped, "aye'm seasick for first time in my life." Tim drove his boot heels into the Finn's ample stern and catapulted him into the water.

Tim got to his feet and two men tried to climb on his back. He staggered under the impact, then dived downward, landing on one of

them. The latter went to work, stabbing at Tim's stomach with his knee and indulging in a little deft eye-gouging. It ended when a miner, built like the coal beaters used in railroad waiting rooms, set his teeth in the man's ear.

Cheers, roars of laughter, and rousing words of encouragement came from the crowd. The waters around the barge were filled with belabored men. Cauliflower ears were taking form, broken noses were swelling to astonishing proportions, and men with eyes closed by flying fists paddled about trying to find their way to the beach.

Here and there a strong man went over the side when a couple of weaker men ganged up on him. But on the whole, only the strong survived. Sooner or later, the weaker men of each faction went over the side. Presently, three miners and four fishermen had the barge to themselves.

"Careful, Tim!" Jess Reagan called. "Don't let 'em gang up on you!"

JESS was between the devil and the deep sea himself. He didn't want to miss an instant of the fight, because plenty of things happened while a man was blinking his eyes. Again, he wanted to watch the reactions of Ray Turner and Ann Sloan. It was apparent Ray had never seen men fight like this. The impact of fist against flesh was so loud that at times it seemed as if the receiver must certainly drop in his tracks. Turner had never seen men hit as hard, yet they came back and sometimes sent the attacker reeling around the barge.

Ann Sloan was puzzled, then something deep within her responded to the spirit of the battle. "She's beginning to understand the thing that puzzles so many women—the fact that men can fight with all this fury, yet there's no meanness behind their blows."

Ann saw Tim Bradford face the pair of fishermen who were determined to knock him into the sea, while their two companions finished Tim's surviving partners. Tim was a battered warrior, with his clothing torn to shreds, and his face bleeding from two bad cheek-bone cuts. But his grin was unrepressed through a crimson smear.

Tim began retreating, trying to keep the two men in each other's way. "Go ahead," a fisherman jeered, "get on your bicycle and run. Why don't you fight like a man, you —" The remainder died in a gurgle as a companion's hand fell over his mouth.

"Pipe down. They's ladies present, Lars," the other man admonished.

Tim turned his head as if to see who was baiting him. This was too much for Ann. "You fool!" she screamed, "they'll kill you."

A man set himself to do that very thing. Even as Ann shouted her protest, Tim dodged neatly and let the blow whistle over his shoulder. The other was off balance and Tim was set. He caught him flush on the

jaw and every ounce of his weight and superb co-ordination was behind the blow, which sent the man reeling and staggering to the edge of the barge. A loud splash and mingled groans and cheers from shore told Tim that he had only one adversary left.

Tim turned to him. The fisherman was a rangy, six-foot-two man with big hands and a willingness to use them. A Viking with reddish hair and unsmiling face, there were over two hundred pounds in his hard body. The two had the barge alone. The miners had been dragged over the side with the fishermen. Now the forty-eight battered contenders lined the beach in their sodden clothing, or stood waist-deep, forgetting the icy water in their excitement.

Shouted advice blended into a single demand which neither Tim nor the Viking heard. They were battering each other with blows that shook them to their heels.

Tim, realizing the Viking's body slams were weakening him and taking the sting out of his own blows, decided to gamble and leave an opening to get in a killing punch. He drove his fist into the other's stomach and felt the big fellow wince, then something exploded on Tim's jaw, sparks flashed before his eyes. A numbness stole over his body, the world whirled, then blurred. The barge deck leaped up to meet him. Then blackness.

Vaguely, Tim heard the roar of many voices. He opened his eyes, expecting to find himself in the water, with the others who had been vanquished. Then from a great distance a man bellowed, "Double knockdown. Both of 'em took a punch to get one in. And did they get it!"

Tim rolled over and got onto his hands and knees. He shook his head several times, then stared at the deck. The boards stopped blurring and became fixed once more. He turned his head and saw the Viking, doubled up, and out cold. Tim caught the man's wrist, then got to his feet. He heaved and the Viking slid a few inches. Tim heaved again and got the Viking to the edge of the barge, then dropped to his knees and rolled the man. The Viking struck the icy water with a loud splash. A miner swam over and kept his head above water.

Tim Bradford acknowledged the cheers of the crowd groggily, jumped overboard. The blessed shock of icy water stirred his blood, and he waded ashore. His day was done—almost. First he would divide the pot among his companions, then he would go to his cabin and take care of his wounds. Later, he might look in on the Grand Ball, but right now he needed rest. It seemed as though the Viking's fists had torn his ribs loose from their moorings.

CHAPTER IV

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

NEXT morning Tim Bradford knocked on Ann Sloan's cabin door. The girl herself opened it. "Want to make that trip underground?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered. "Why weren't you at the dance last night?"

"Well, I wasn't the handsomest man in the world," he grinned. "Besides, I stretched out on my bunk to relax and didn't wake up until midnight. Then it was too late."

Ann came out a few minutes later, dressed in hip boots and a slicker. The utilitarian garb only emphasized her blond loveliness. She smiled at Tim's closed eye and battered features.

"You're a sight, Mr. Bradford.

But what a grand battle it was, from start to finish! Particularly, the finish. Do you know, I believe you enjoyed that."

"Sure," he answered. "Why not? We work underground, week after week. At night we quit, dog tired, and go to bed. Gradually, the need of relaxation piles up inside, and we feel we'll explode if we don't do something. Well, you saw us doing something." He grinned. "Ready?"

"Yes," she answered. "The others will be along in a minute."

So the others were going. Tim didn't relish that. He wanted to show Ann the mine without others, particularly Ray Turner, tagging along and asking questions. Kirk Turner came out a few minutes later.

"Good morning, Bradford," he said. "Where's Reagan? I want to ask him a few questions, then I'll join you." He turned to the girl. "Ray will be along in a minute, Ann."

Kirk Turner stepped briskly into the superintendent's office. Jess Reagan, grim and white with anger, was talking to a loose-lipped, sloppy young man whose black eyes were sullen. Jess Reagan wasn't drunk this morning. He was brisk, clear-minded—the superintendent that could keep a low-grade mine out of the red.

"You got drunk on duty, Pelton," Jess was saying. "Passed out, and the compressor in your charge burned out a bearing and cut off the air supply. A shift got caught in a cross-cut after a blast. It might have been serious. As it turned out, lack of pure air only gave some of the boys a headache and a desire to murder you. I've given you chances before. The last time I warned you if you got drunk on duty again, you were through. Go get your time!"

"O. K.," Pelton snarled, "but I ain't worked here for five years for nothin'. I can tell a few things if I want to. This mine would be payin' bigger dividends if you'd let it, Reagan. But you're keepin' the clean-ups down so the stock will be low-priced, and you and Tim Bradford can buy it up cheap."

"Pelton," Reagan said icily, "that's a damned lie, and you know it."

Pelton turned to Kirk Turner who was standing listening. "Look at the stock transfer books, Mr. Turner, and then see if I'm a liar." He stalked from the room and headed for the timekeeper's office. Jess Reagan had made an enemy, a bad one, and he knew it.

MR. TURNER," Reagan explained, "you'll find occasional transfers of small amounts of shares. Both Tim Bradford and I are putting our savings into Old Glory stock. I know of none better for steady returns. I've advised the others to put their savings into the mine and many of them have done so. Occasionally it happens some of the smaller stockholders living Outside believe they can make more money by turning their investments over often. When they sell Old Glory, we try to buy it."

"Yes, I know," Kirk Turner said briskly. "Now, Reagan, just who is this fellow Pelton?"

"He's Mrs. Daylight Lee's nephew," Reagan answered. "Her dead sister's son. We've been trying to make something of him, because he really knows mining."

"Really knows mining?" Turner made this observation mentally. He wasn't forgetting Pelton had said Reagan was limiting profits. Then aloud he said, "But I didn't come back here to talk about Pelton.

You promised my son a break. When is he going to get it?"

"He had it yesterday afternoon when we staged the battle royal," Reagan said promptly. "I made the invitation clear enough; everyone connected with the mine could volunteer. If Ray had gone into the fight he would have won the instant admiration and respect of the men. It wouldn't have made any difference whether he'd been knocked into the water with the first punch or not. They'd have known he was one of them."

"I don't think Ray realized his opportunity," Turner retorted.

"It's been my experience a man must come pretty near to recognizing his opportunity if he expects to make the grade in any line of work," said Reagan.

Kirk Turner admitted this to himself, but he wasn't admitting it to his superintendent. "I'm not so sure I like your methods," he said dryly.

"If they're wrong," Reagan replied, and again he put Turner on the defensive, "then they won't be successful in the long run. Now is there anything I can do for you today?"

"Tim Bradford is taking Miss Sloan below ground," Turner replied. "I'll go along with them. I'd like to form my own opinion of this tin god of yours."

"Damn you, Turner," Reagan said savagely, "you'll apologize for that, or I'll resign and take Tim Bradford with me. No man is going to insult me publicly or privately."

"If you resign," Turner retorted, "you bet you'll take Tim Bradford with you." Then his ingrained business shrewness whispered to his horse sense and reminded him there was only one Jess Reagan, and experiments in new superintendents would prove costly.

Kirk Turner smiled. "I'm sorry, Reagan," he said, the words almost sticking in his throat, "I flew off the handle. You see, I'd pictured Ray running this mine when you resigned, and it's something of a blow to find another young fellow being groomed for the place."

"There's no reason why Tim and Ray can't work together," Jess Reagan declared. "In time, Ray will be taking over your many interests, and he'll need a superintendent here. Tim's the man. But Ray's got to start from the bottom with the muckers and work up, as Tim did. He can't be eased into a soft job and expect to go far with the men."

"I guess you're right," Turner said, with forced good humor. "Well, I'll see you later, Reagan." He hurried briskly from the office and permitted himself to blow up well beyond earshot. "I'd like to fire that damned mucker. But where would I find a man to take his place? Damn it, Ray's got to learn this business so I can fire Reagan. I won't have a man with his impudence working for me."

KIRK TURNER hurried to his cabin where he found his son getting into waterproof clothing. "Ray," he said crisply, "Reagan's just fired a fellow named Sam Pelton—the Lee's nephew. Pelton is pretty much of a rat, as you'll immediately observe, but he knows the Old Glory mine, and he's in a mood to take revenge on Reagan. He may be the man you're looking for. Anyway, see what you can learn from him."

"I'll do it this afternoon," Ray answered. "I want to go along with Ann and Bradford."

"Forget Ann and Bradford," Turner said angrily, "and go after Pelton while he's in a mood to knife

someone in the back. Damn it, Ray, you blew a big chance yesterday. Don't do it again!"

"What chance did I blow, yesterday?"

"A chance to get into that battle royal and prove yourself," Turner replied.

Ray Turner looked at his father in amazement. "I'll put on the gloves with any man for a friendly bout," he retorted. "I'm not afraid, but if you admire men who go into a bare-fisted brawl with the scum of the mines and sea, you'd better take out adoption papers on Tim Bradford. I'm going with Ann. I don't want Bradford getting on the good side of her and making himself solid. Don't forget, that although we control forty-five percent of Old Glory stock, Ann has thirty percent. We need her voting strength to control the mine. We'd have a swell time lining up the remaining twenty-five percent, scattered as it is, among a flock of little fellows!"

"I'm disappointed in you, Ray," Turner said bluntly. "You're not as smart as I've judged you to be. First, don't insult Ann by even thinking Bradford can influence her. Secondly, never miss a chance to listen to a man boiling over with resentment. Remember, an angry man or woman will reveal things a ten-ton truck couldn't drag out of 'em in their cooler moments."

"All right," Ray agreed reluctantly. "I'll look up Pelton."

He found the discharged miner in the bunkhouse packing up. Pelton was throwing things into a battered suitcase and muttering to himself angrily. An opened bottle of liquor was on a shelf nearby.

"I hear Reagan fired you," Ray came to the point promptly. "I don't blame you for being sore at being canned by a man who was plastered himself yesterday."

Pelton's first reaction was one of suspicion. Then he thawed. "Say, you ain't a bad guy," he said. "I had you pegged for a dude, but you sound like a reasonable cuss."

"I try to be," Ray said modestly. "I try to look at the other fellow's side of the case."

"Too bad there ain't more like you," Pelton said regretfully. "If you were runnin' the Old Glory, then we could set down an' talk this over, man to man, an' maybe you'd give me another chance."

"I might," Ray admitted. "You know the mining game, I hear. Is it much of a trick to keep the Old Glory moving?"

"Hell, no!" Pelton answered. "I could run her myself, if I had a little more education." His eyes narrowed as he appraised Turner. "You're a mining engineer and you should be able to run this mine like nobody's business. That is, you could, if I tipped you off to a few little tricks. Little short cuts that keep the operatin' costs down."

"What?"

"When you're made superintendent," Pelton promised, "I'll tell you. And I'd expect you'd do the right thing by me. Maybe I'd get a shift boss' job, or assistant superintendent? Though I suppose you'd

give Tim Bradford *that* job?" It was a query, and there was cunning in Pelton's eyes when he put it.

"I'm afraid there wouldn't be room enough for both Bradford and me, even in a mine as large as the Old Glory," Turner observed. "But why leave the mine? Why don't you go and live with the Lees until something turns up?"

"Daylight don't like me," Pelton answered. "He said the next time I had a run-in with Reagan, he wouldn't go to the bat for me."

Ray Turner was learning rapidly. He deduced from Pelton's statement that Daylight had gone to the bat for him on other occasions. Yet he had just got through saying Daylight didn't like him. The man, Turner decided, was a liar and would bear watching. But even liars are useful on occasion.

By putting a few shrewd questions he learned that Pelton's aunt, Tess Lee, had tried to make something of him, but with poor success. He learned, too, even at this late date, Tess Lee believed her nephew would find himself, as she termed it, and develop into a good man. But she was proud and she had determined never to ask her husband to aid her nephew again. Thus far, all Sam Pelton had brought the Lees was disappointment and humiliation.

When Ray Turner finished his visit with Pelton he was in high spirits. He felt that he had done a good job of keeping the fires of Pelton's resentment burning, and drawing from the man much of importance in operating the mine. Pelton had even hinted he knew where high-grade ore might be found. Not much, but enough to justify a small extra dividend.

"And enough," Ray told himself enthusiastically, "for a new superintendent, for example, to make a good showing until his feet take root in the job."

SAM PELTON'S packing job was done at last. He walked to the bunkhouse window and stared resentfully at the superintendent's office. His lips twisted in a snarl. "*There's* a buzzard I'm goin' to get," he murmured. "If I could just follow him into the mine, today! I know his habits and— But, hell, I'd never get into the mine. Everybody knows I've been fired."

He heard a rumble above the roar of the stamps and saw an electric locomotive draw a string of ore cars from the mine and spot them above the hungry hoppers. "Why not?" he asked himself softly. "Why not? I might get away with it." He took another drink, tucked the flask in his pocket to further fortify his courage as coming situations demanded, then left the bunkhouse and walked along a trail below the mill for some distance. The trail intersected another that climbed Mineral Mountain in a series of switchbacks.

Pelton followed the switchback to a point above the tram road, turned into the woods and made his way to the tram. A few minutes later the empty cars moved back. He swung aboard one of the cars containing supplies for the lower levels and covered himself partially with several lengths of air hose.

The cars were shunted into the skip and presently shot downward. Pelton remained in the car until it was taken by a small electric locomotive some distance down a cross cut, then he unloaded. He walked rapidly for several rods, turning on light from a pocket torch whenever he was uncertain, then switching it off again.

Presently he heard the footsteps of a heavy man approaching. He flattened himself against the wall and waited. It was blacker than night, but the other carried no lamp. It was Daylight Lee, the only man who went around the mine without a lamp.

Daylight's hearing was amazing, and Pelton held his breath as the blind man approached. "Hello, there," Daylight said presently, "better be careful. A train's due."

Pelton resisted the impulse to crash a rock down on the blind man's head. Maybe Daylight wasn't sure. The blind man walked past and shouted again, then Pelton heard him mutter, "I'd have sworn I heard a man's clothes brush agin' the rock wall."

Pelton waited a long time, then shot his light down the cross cut to make certain Daylight wasn't standing there listening.

Pelton descended a long ladder to another cross cut, followed it some distance, then stopped again. Here mining operations had extended high into the mountain, as well as straight down to a point several hundred feet below sea level. Jess Reagan had talked some of working even higher into the mountain, in the hope of picking up a lost vein that ran two dollars a ton. As it is cheaper to let ore drop of its own weight to the level of the car tracks, than to hoist it upward, the mill charges against the two-dollar ore were proportionately lower.

On the third of July, Reagan had examined the vein and surrounding structure with a view to putting diamond drills to work to determine the value. Since the superintendent hadn't arrived at a decision, Pelton was fairly certain he would show up sometime today.

PELTON began climbing slowly up a series of steel ladders attached to the wall. There had once been a vertical ore vein in this part of the mine, but the ore had long since gone through the mill, and the tailings were deep in Deception Straits. At frequent intervals there were platforms built on steel bars driven into the solid rock. Pelton rested and listened on each of these platforms. When he reached the top, he sprawled out and waited.

Water dripped from the rock above, making the platform eternally cold and damp. The mine was cold and the air was dead. Pelton wanted to smoke, but he was afraid the odor, or even the glow of the cigarette might betray him. An eternity passed, and he looked at his watch. He had only been here ten minutes. He began to have misgivings. Suppose he didn't make a good job of it? Suppose Reagan lived and identified him? Then he shook off his nervousness. "Hell," he told himself, "a man can't fall five hundred feet or more, land on hard rock, and live." He took a drink and his confidence was restored.

A moment later the rumble of ore trains sounded on the levels below him, and he heard Tim Bradford's voice saying, "This level runs under Deception Straits. If we followed all of the vein, chances are, we'd break through the ocean floor."

"Is there any chance of the ocean floor breaking and flooding the mine?" Ann Sloan inquired. Her voice had a strange, hollow sound as it echoed up the shaft.

"Jess Reagan took that into consideration. We took out a million tons of ore directly under the ocean floor," Tim explained, "but we left pillars adequate to support the floor. If the sea did break through? Well it would be—"

"Good-by to Old Glory mine," the girl said.

"Yes," Tim admitted, "that's about the size of it."

"You don't seem sure the mine would be lost," she remarked.

"Well," Tim said slowly, "pushing back the sea, plugging the hole and pumping out the mine, would be a problem that might not be solved. Or if it were solved, it might be too expensive. But Jess Reagan wouldn't give up without a fight. He'd try to work out some scheme to beat the sea. He's that way. Again and again, it has looked as if the mine might have to be abandoned, but Jess always got around the obstacle in some way."

"Why," Ann exclaimed, "the stockholders never knew that."

"Jess isn't a man to worry stockholders," Tim said. Then their voices grew distant and finally died away as they went on to another part of the mine.

Another hour dragged by before the waiting man saw a light below him. It swayed back and forth steadily, its beam stabbing blackness, and occasionally flooding the wall with white light. It was Reagan, Pelton knew, and his heart began to pound.

The light stopped at one of the landings. It was apparent Reagan was examining an old vein containing very low-grade ore. This continued for some time, then the light began receding.

"Goin' back down," Pelton murmured thickly. "And I'd've bet my last dollar he was comin' up here."

He groped around for one of the shattered pieces of stone that slip from the walls in mines. He found a piece that must have weighed thirty pounds. Holding it over the edge, he dropped it. He heard the whistle as it gained speed, then the crash as it struck below.

"Missed him," Pelton muttered. He picked up a smaller piece and dropped it, closer to the ladder this time.

He heard it strike the man's composition helmet, then a sharp cry echoed through the vaulted blackness. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Reagan's falling body as his lamp, turning over and over, whipped a beam upward. Pelton waited and heard a sickening crash. Then the light was blotted out as the lamp struck and shattered.

A shudder ran through Pelton as he realized he had accomplished the job which had brought him down into the depths of the mine. He took another drink to steady his nerves, then began the slow descent to the tram level. He had an idea there would be a new superintendent at Old Glory, and his name would be Ray Turner.

What will become of the Old Glory if the man responsible for its success dies? Will Sam Pelton be able to leave the mine without being seen? Who will be next superintendent of the mine? Next week's issue brings another exciting installment of this dramatic mining story. Don't miss it!

BLIZZARD PAYOFF

BY PAUL ELLSWORTH TRIEM

THE weather was still clear when Jim Spahn descended from the stage at Hornet Springs. But he knew that these quiet days of pale-gold sunshine couldn't last. This was the short-grass country, and he could see the fine, thick growth of buffalo grass through the snow. It had taken on its winter color; gray, with a faint tinge of blue. To an Easterner this country of rounded hills and wide valleys would have seemed a desert, incapable of supporting life. But this was part of the Juniper Basin winter range, and with the coming of snow, which made the cattle independent of rivers and waterholes, the vast herds of the syndicates started to arrive.

Spahn had little fear that he would be recognized. He had been away five years. When he left he had been brown with the sun and there hadn't been a white hair in his head. Now he was sallow and there were silvery patches at his temples. That was what Bill Gaffney, the association detective, had done to him—stolen five of the best years of his life away forever, put a felon's brand on him!

Bill Gaffney was out here somewhere. Spahn had made good use of his ears as he pushed deeper into

the hills. Yes, Gaffney was out on the winter range.

"I'll run him down and settle my account with him in full!" Spahn thought as his swift, predatory stride carried him down the wintry street of the cow town. "After that I'll try to get through to the south. There's still some big cow outfits down there beyond the granger's deadline, in Kansas!"

Being no fool, he knew there was an alternative. If he was caught, after settling with Gaffney, they'd make short work of him. His dangling body would be left tied to some cottonwood tree for the ravens to peck at. But without really considering this possibility, Jim Spahn walked swiftly on, drawing in deep breaths of the tangy foothill air, till he reached the livery stable he had seen from the stage station.

A leathery-faced old stableman came out and stood mutely waiting.

"I want to buy a horse and saddle—as complete an outfit as you've got!" Spahn announced.

Brown, crinkly lidded eyes squinted up at him. "Drifting, cowboy?" the old stableman asked.

"Yes."

"Lookin' fer work?"

Spahn smiled. It was a tight-lipped smile, and a little spark of bright light came into his gray, unwinking eyes.

"I've got my job in sight, stranger," said Spahn.

The old man nodded. "No offense meant," he said. "Yeah, I got an outfit—complete! A feller that was going to Kansas City with a beef shipment lef' it fer me to sell."

He led the way into the stable. It had the old familiar smell of saddle leather. And back in a rear stall Spahn inspected a Roman-nosed roan gelding and found him a tough, dependable-looking brute. There was also a good stock saddle, a bridle trimmed with silver conchas, a Winchester carbine and saddle holster and a warbag. In the latter Spahn found a pair of blankets, a slicker, an awl, some whang-leather thongs, a combination wire cutter and pliers, and a box of .45 cartridges which would fit the big gun he wore on his right hip. Half an hour later he rode out of town.

SPAHN sighted a line cabin late that afternoon, and another the following day. He scouted them both till he had a good look at the occupants. He would have to ride farther to find Bill Gaffney.

It was getting along toward the early sundown of the second day when Spahn noticed that the wind was changing. It had been blowing fitfully in from the south, but now it shifted, became steady, and when Spahn looked toward the "weather pot" in the northwest where this new wind originated he saw that a silvery haze hung there.

The haze gathered bulk by the moment, rose higher and higher, till it caught up the sun and quenched it. Now it came scudding forward, high overhead, blotting out the sky, swooping low to obliterate distant clumps of cottonwoods. It began to moan, and soon it was laden with small, compact pellets of snow.

Spahn dug heels into the flanks of the roan. The wind was developing into gale proportions. Spahn drew on his slicker, turned up the collar, and tucked the sleeves into the flaring cuffs of his gauntlets.

The flakes of snow were larger now and they drove past Spahn in great swarms, like stampeding white butterflies. Soon he was surrounded by gray darkness, and the cold was pressing in with lethal ferocity.

Nothing could live long in the full

stride of the storm which was still rising. Spahn's thin lips crinkled into a grin of appreciation. The joke was on him. He thought of the belly laugh Gaffney would have when the body of the man he had framed for brand changing was found next spring—under the snow.

Spahn had given the roan its head and was sitting crouched forward in the saddle, hoping that the horse would take him to some draw where they could take shelter. Suddenly the big fellow stopped dead in his tracks. Peering ahead, Spahn saw a bunch of steers, which had evidently drifted before the blizzard till they struck wire. Now they were sullenly waiting whatever came. Some were already down.

Spahn slid out of the saddle and stumbled forward. He could just make out the dark bulk of the individual steers, but his groping fingers traced a brand on left shoulder and flank.

"Star-bar!" he muttered. "That's a new one on me!"

Fighting his way back to the roan, which stood with drooping head, backed up to the wind, Spahn untied his warback and fished out the pliers. The tight wire sang as he clipped each strand. The buzzard that had strung this wire must have known he was fencing in part of the public domain," he thought.

"If I had time I'd jerk it down and trail it over half the county fer him!" he growled.

He began tailing the steers that were down. After he had them all lumbering through the gap in the fence he got back into his saddle and again gave the roan its head. It must have been half an hour later, although Spahn had lost all definite idea of time, that the animal topped a ridge and came quartering down into a valley and again stopped.

There was some kind of human shelter over there, facing them. At first Spahn thought it was a cabin. Then he saw that it was a dugout, built back into the sloping face of a gully wall.

He didn't stop to pound on the door. It opened easily to his push and before the push of the wind, and he stumbled into the unlighted room. The air in here was warm, in contrast to what he had just been through.

He got the door shut, struck a match, and saw a lantern hung from a peg driven into one sod wall. There were no windows. A rusty cook stove, a homemade chair and table, and a rough bunk, covered with blankets and buffalo hides, made up the furnishings. Whoever owned the dugout was away from home.

The roan was pawing at the door. Spahn saw that he couldn't get the animal through the low doorway. He went outside and, with his gauntleted hands, groped till he found one end of a tight-stretched wire about shoulder high.

Trailing the wire with his left hand, he led the horse through the howling darkness. The wind, striking them from the side, made both horse and man stumble. But the other end of the wire was pegged, as Spahn had guessed, to the front of a second and larger dugout. Blizzard wires were common and necessary in this part of the hills. He led the animal inside, removed his riding gear, and was halfway back to the dugout when he heard an eerie, wind-driven voice.

IT wasn't the bawl of a steer, as Spahn, in the first moment, had hoped. It was a man's voice, desperate and exhausted. Spahn tried

to shout back, but the wind filled his mouth with snow.

Then he realized that he could use the blizzard itself to lead him back to the dugout or at least to this tight-stretched wire, once he had located the stranger. All he would have to do was keep the wind squarely on his back.

This was the first time he had faced into the wind. With one gigantic blow it knocked the breath out of him. He fought forward, body bent, lungs struggling. The cry came again, closer this time.

A horse stood with bowed head, and under it Spahn found the refugee from the blizzard. The poor devil was nearly done for. Spahn got the bulky body over the horse's back and together they lunged back through the dark. He was afraid that he might, after all, miss the mark he was aiming at, but at last they landed squarely in front of the dugout.

Spahn carried the heavy body, quite limp now, into the lighted room. He lowered it to the bunk and stood panting, looking down. For a long moment he saw only the collapsed figure, the snow-plastered face, of a stranger. Then, his breath locked in his throat, his heart pausing in its heavy beat, he sprang forward, scraping away the covering from that gaunt, bearded face.

Gaffney! Bill Gaffney, roughly and poorly dressed—his great, arrogant nose like a bony peak on his thin face. Spahn straightened and took a step back. His hand swung toward the gun on his hip.

Then, for the second time since the coming of the blizzard, he laughed. Another joke! For until he had thawed out and otherwise restored this derelict from the storm, he couldn't pay off that debt that had been irking him for five years!

With a shrug he went to work. He drew off Gaffney's outer clothing and covered him with a buffalo robe. The stock detective's cheeks were white, his fingers were frosted. He worked over him as solicitously as if they had been old pals on the range.

But as the white went out of Gaffney's face a new and ominous shade came into it, not the returning pink of flesh color, but a deep and angry red. And the man was breathing queerly, in swift, shallow respirations that ended every few moments in a racking cough. Spahn stretched down his fingers and touched that scarlet cheek. It was hot as the lid of a stove!

"Why, dang it all, he's sick! Looks like he'd been half starved an' now the cold has got into his lungs!" he said through his teeth.

Gaffney's lips stirred, he began to mutter. "Cold!" he said, and his teeth chattered.

SPAHN spun around. In three fierce strides he crossed to the stove. A fire was laid and he touched it off. Then, with a frowning side glance at his old enemy, he walked to the door and went outside.

Gaffney's horse stood there, patiently waiting. Spahn led him to the stable dugout and unsaddled him. He left the two exhausted animals and went back, staggering under the mighty drive of the roaring wind. Inside the dugout he found the stove turning red.

There were a few sticks of wood behind it, and after Spahn had crowded these into the firebox he turned and saw that Gaffney's eyes were wide open, and staring at him with delirious intensity.

"Jim Spahn!" Gaffney said in a weird, feverish voice. "It sure looks . . . like him!"

His lids, purple and almost trans-

parent, dropped over his eyes. A second later he snapped them open, a look of fear came into his face.

"Is it . . . really . . . *you?*" he whispered.

Spahn walked slowly toward the bunk. He could see the buffalo robe pulsate with the sick man's rapid breathing. Again he stretched down his fingers and touched that scarlet cheek. Suddenly Gaffney began to cough. Something inside him seemed to tear loose and he spat out bloody foam.

As soon as the paroxysm was over he started to talk. His voice shook with insane excitement. "You put a spell on me, Spahn!" he croaked. "I'd thought that by turning suspicion on you—an' that was easy, because you'd fought the big boys single-handed till their tongues was hanging out, an' they *wanted* to believe you was crooked—I thought by framing you with them green hides with the blotched brands I could git a chance to slip in a few more shipments of rustled beef on my own account. All I wanted was enough of a stake to buy me a little spread, with range rights an' water."

With Spahn watching him silently, he continued:

"But they must have suspicioned me, after all. First thing I knowed, another guy they'd fetched in had me by the heels, an' I was took into the association office an' told I could strip down an' turn over everything I owned, or go down the line to the same place I'd sent you. I went out of that room danged near busted. I was ordered off the range, but I come up here an' scraped up a little herd of cows, but they ringed me in with wire an' guns. Spahn, I've lived through hell—"

He tried to rise to his elbow. A paroxysm of coughing caught him and he slipped down sidewise. He had fainted.

Spahn shrugged sullenly. His vengeance would have to wait. He walked over to the stove and lifted a lid. The fire was nearly out.

He strode back to the bed. "Where's your wood pile, Gaffney?" he demanded.

Gaffney opened wild, fever-bright eyes. His shaggy head, with its great, lean hawk's nose, was quivering.

"No . . . wood!" he muttered. "That's what I . . . went . . . after!" His lids sagged and he lay breathing fast and coughing up bloody foam.

"All I've got to do is to walk out of here, and git aboard my horse an' ride!" Spahn was telling himself. "I'll be gambling my life agin' the blizzard. But it won't be no gamble with him. He'll die afore this time tomorrow!"

This killing wind would probably blow for at least three days. There was no fuel. Obviously Gaffney had been hemmed in by his old employers, the big fellows, and had been kept from laying up a winter supply. Today he had made a desperate sortie.

"I'd be a fool to stay here," Spahn thought. "It's sure death! If I drift I may git through to some line cabin. An' Gaffney will die without my putting a bullet into him!"

That thought was as bitter as strychnine.

"I'll stick here—an' try to pull him through!" Spahn gritted through clenched teeth. "He ain't entitled to die easy in bed, thisaway!"

Cold was beginning to move in palpable waves through the dugout. Spahn looked at the rough table and chair. They would furnish heat for a little while. He looked at the sod walls, the roof. The latter was sup-

ported on poles of slender pine. But if he ripped out the poles the roof would come down. Apparently there wasn't a stick of timber on this poverty-stricken ranch that could be burned!

Spahn sat down on the edge of the bunk and leaned forward, watching the pouchy, fever-scorched face. Gaffney was beginning to mutter.

"Steers—my steers, boys!" he said in the eerie voice of delirium. "Listen, I come here to git out of the way, an' I bought the Star-bar brand an' that handful of cows! I'm down, boys. I'm on my back! Don't tromp me! Give me a chance jes' to make a living!"

The muttering ceased, and Gaffney, holding his breath, seemed to listen. He groaned and began to whimper.

SPAHN sat fascinated. The Bill Gaffney he remembered had been arrogant and ruthless. He and his iron-gray horse had ridden the range with a high-handed disregard for the right of the little fellows, the ex-cowboys trying to get started on their own, the nesters from Nebraska. But now *that* Bill Gaffney was gone, and this broken man lay under the buffalo robes, whimpering.

"Cold!" Gaffney whispered, shivering. "Don't leave me staked out here in the snow, boys! Let me git warm once more an' I'll do just what you say! I'll go away!"

His teeth rattled and his coughing increased. Spahn stood up, crossed to the table and chair, and smashed them into pieces that would fit into the stove. He relighted the fire.

Then he fought his way out to the stable. There, with a lighted match held over his head, he looked about for something to burn. There wasn't even an armful of slough hay.

When Spahn got back to the lighted dugout, waves of perishing cold were moving across it and the splintered cottonwood he stuffed into the stove was too light to raise the temperature.

Gaffney was muttering again. He was worrying about his steers, and Spahn remembered the bunch of Star-bar cattle he had driven through the fence.

"They're the finest beef steers on the range, boys!" Gaffney suddenly cried. "Buy 'em from me; I got a bill of sale. Buy 'em at your own price an' let me go away! I know when I'm licked! You can have my land. I got twenty acres of sub-irrigated volcanic ash thet I raised a bumper corn crop on—"

His lips grew still, again he seemed to be listening to some dread voice inaudible to Spahn. His head began to jerk from side to side and he groaned.

Spahn turned back to the stove. He had just fed in the last of his light fuel when something snapped inside his brain. It was something Gaffney had just said in his delirium.

Spahn whirled. He crossed to the bunk, stooped, and gripped the sick man's arm.

"Come out of it, Gaffney!" he rasped. "What's that about corn? You said you raised twenty acres!"

"Corn!" Gaffney screamed, and sat bolt upright, clawing at air. "Sub-irrigated land . . . my corn is better than my daddy raised back in Ohio. What am I bid, gentlemen?"

He was crazy as a loon. Jim Spahn pushed him down and held him with a big hand on each shoulder.

"Where is it? Where is the corn you raised, Gaffney?" he cried in a voice that bit like steel. "*Where is your corn?*"

Gaffney lay back again with that

strange expression of listening to something that James Spahn couldn't hear.

"Where's the corn, Bill?" Spahn repeated. "Try to understand. We're in your cabin, and we'll be froze stiff before morning! Corn will burn—like coal!"

For an instant Gaffney didn't breathe. Then his eyes came part way open.

"What did you say?"

"Where's your corn? It isn't in the stable!"

"Beyond the stable . . . covered with hay . . . fence round it—"

Gaffney dropped back into that deathlike stupor. Spahn hurried out. Holding an end of two lariats tied together and lashed to the front of the stable, he fought his way in a great circle around the latter.

The wind smashed at him like the thigh-thick blast from a monitor muzzle. Time and again he was driven to his knees. All feeling had gone out of his face, his lungs burned and choked him.

But he found the stake inclosure around the corn. He climbed through the fence, burrowed through the frozen hay, felt the long, smooth ears of Indian maize.

Carrying a huge armful, he fought his way back to the cabin and started the fire. He got the corn to burning. Throughout the remainder of the night, Spahn alternately rested, rubbing the frost out of his body, and lurched and tumbled back and forth between the corn pile and the dugout where Gaffney tossed and muttered.

Toward morning he was sure Gaffney was dying. The gaunt figure lay on its back, lean nose pointed toward the low roof. Gaffney seemed to have stopped breathing. Spahn sat beside him, silent, fascinated. He had done his best.

But Gaffney came back from that dark valley, where his troubled spirit had hovered. He lay in a torpor, radiating heat, coughing till bloody froth sprang to his lips.

ON the third day the blizzard wind dropped. The sun came out, and Spahn, standing in front of the dugout, looked over low hills that shone like freshly beaten white of egg.

Gaffney lay with his sunken eyes open when Spahn went into the dugout. There was a heap of yellow-ear corn beside the stove and the room was cozily warm.

Spahn stood looking at his old enemy. The bloodshot eyes that met his, from shadowy caverns, were humble and pleading.

Spahn shrugged. Without speaking, he went back outside, closed the door, strode away toward the stable. He saddled the roan and led it into the clear, cold air.

Riding away over the first of the hills, Spahn turned in the saddle to look back. A gaunt figure that resembled a scarecrow decked in rags stood in the doorway watching him go.

Spahn turned resolutely toward the west. He rode on till he came to the edge of a wide basin, where he struck the first of the wire fences that had been thrown round Gaffney by the syndicate outfits. That fence was a deadline, a mortal challenge. And out over the shining white floor of the valley Spahn saw two riders jogging along, elbows loosely flapping, behind a bunch of steers.

Spahn sat irresolute. There was something about those tight wires that made him restless. The deadline fence took him back five years —to his own siege. They'd tried to ring him in, just as they were ring-

ing Gaffney. Well, he'd given them a bellyful!

"It's Gaffney's steers them two hombres is herding!" Spahn thought. "Same bunch I let through the fence. Hell, I ought to give 'em plenty of clearance an' keep on riding west! No business of mine—"

His eyes flicked back to the shining wires. A thin-lipped smile suddenly stirred beneath gleaming and narrowed eyes.

Deliberately Spahn slid to the snow. He untied his warbag and fished out his cutting pliers.

Cutting the wires, Spahn had an electric feeling throughout his big, muscular body that at any moment a rifle might crack, a bullet might drill him through the backbone. After he had clipped the wires he uncoiled his rope, tied an end to one of the wire strands, and swung back into the saddle. With a dally round the horn, he rode off at a lope. He could hear the staples pop as they jerked loose.

He turned his head, still smiling tightly. The two riders behind the steers had stopped their horses to watch him. One of them reached down and came up with a rifle in his hands. Then they separated and came riding forward from opposite sides.

SPAHN finished with the first wire, drew up the end and untied it. The next moment he had snaked out his saddle gun and was facing the nearer of the two riders, the one who had drawn his Winchester. Spahn studied the rawboned figure, the swarthy face with its small, shining black eyes.

"Hi, Monte," he shouted. Suddenly his right hand went straight up, palm front, thumb and fingers touching in the Indian peace sign. Monte Two-strike was part Osage Indian. Spahn remembered a time when the tall, saddle-colored cowboy had worn his hair in a roach straight down the middle of his otherwise shaved head, and had sported an agency blanket.

"Come on, come on," he called. "I ain't goin' to hurt no one—if you boys behave!"

Monte sat with his little eyes wary, his face expressionless. Then he nodded and clucked to his horse. "Hi, Jim," he grunted. He turned to his companion, a freckled youngster whose pale-blue eyes were beginning to bulge. "C'mon, kid," Monte said. "An' keep yer hands away from yer gun!"

Spahn was coiling his rope. Monte stared at it, then sidewise at the wire. His beady eyes came back to Spahn's face.

"Yeah," Jim Spahn said, "I'm going to teetotally destroy that fence,

Monte shook his head. "They'll be here!"

Instinctively Monte's lithe hand moved down toward the rifle poised across his thighs. It came away and he spoke sullenly.

"Spahn, the guys that ordered that fence built are too big fer you to buck. You tried it once an'—"

"An' I had 'em bawling fer more room to stampede onto!" Spahn cut in. "I kin do it ag'in!"

"Monte shook his head. "They'll git you," he warned. "They'll dry-gulch you!"

James Spahn looked musingly away. He shook his head.

"I don't think so, Monte. I got a hunch I'm going to make powerful medicine in these here hills, an' a lot of pliers men are going to bite the dust if they try to buck me. You go back to the feller you work fer an' tell him I took over them steers you was hazing off the range. Tell him I'm tearing out his danged out-

law fence by the roots. An' tell him if he wants any truck with me, he kin ride out hisself an' git it! The time when a bunch of armchair cattlemen in the Cheyenne Club an' back in New York could rule the range is over. There's enough private owners to fight the syndicates —if that's what them big fellers want. But you keep out of it, Monte. I've made medicine, and *He-am-ma-wihio,* the Great Spirit, came to me in my sleep an' told me just what to do!"

It was a lengthy, solemnly delivered speech for him, and he watched its effect on the breed. Monte stared at him in cryptic silence. Then he nodded to his companion, wheeled his horse, and rode silently away.

IT was dark when Jim Spahn came back into the little valley of the dugout. He fed his horse and went trampling along the path through the snow.

Bill Gaffney sat huddled beside the stove. He turned his cordy neck and stared with defeated eyes at the big man whose wide shoulders filled the doorway.

"You . . . back?" he said huskily. "Jim . . . you forgit something?"

Spahn came in and closed the door. "Bill," he said slowly, "I come here in the first place to kill you, but when I see the shape you was in I figgered I'd been gypped. You stole five years of my life, an' they was no way I could make you pay fer it. So I patched you up an' rid away.

"But it's come to me that you wasn't so much to blame. You jes' tried to git out of the bog you was in, same as I did. You took a crooked way, an' you was made to pay fer it. That's over an' done with. But the fight you're in with the syndicates is my old fight, an' I'm takin' it over. I'm staying right here. You kin figger out any business arrangements you want to."

Gaffney's face was in his hands and he was shaking.

"Business?" he whispered. "Jim, I've been through hell an' I've learned my lesson! This here spread is yours. When I git strong ag'in I'll try to help you. You . . . you won't mind having me around?"

Jim Spahn looked pityingly at the shrunken figure by the stove. Gaffney might never be worth much again. He had been all but crushed by the men he, Jim Spahn, had always fought.

A prescience of victory sang in Spahn's nerves, simmered and bubbled in his blood. It would take the combined resources of all the small outfits in the hills to win this war. But it would be won. And when it was won, Bill Gaffney, too, would have a share in the glory.

Jim Spahn came across to the stove, and his big, strong hand rested lightly on the shoulder of his old enemy.

"Mind having you around, Bill?" he said. "Hell, we're pards from here out!"

THE END.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The cattle business of Texas had grown to be an important industry as early as the first days of Anglo-American civilization. According to the United States census of 1880, it was estimated that there were one hundred thousand head of cattle in Texas as early as 1830. Spanish cattle occupied about four-fifths of the extent of the settled portion of the territory and cattle from the United States stocked the other fifth.

By 1837 the industry had become so great that Texas cowboys were gathering herds of from three hundred to a thousand head of wild unbranded cattle of the Nueces River and the Rio Grande country and driving them to the interior towns to market. Five years later the first drives were made to New Orleans.

During the period of the great drives to market there were four main breeds of cattle in the Southwest. These were: First, the "wild cattle," of West Texas and New Mexico, brown in color with a light stripe down the back and long, slender blue horns. Second, the Texan-

Mexican animals of every color, with white patches, horns that were enormously long and thin with a half twist back, tall gaunt bodies and narrow hips. Third, the Mexican or "Spanish" cattle. These were smaller with shorter horns and not so wild. Fourth, there were the "chino" or "curly-haired Texans," which were large, heavy, well-formed and round with rather long legs. Their horns were medium size and shaped like those of Missouri cattle.

Cattle raising in those days constituted little problem to the stockmen. With natural food and forage plentiful and with the help of the mild climate, cattle fattened easily. There were untold thousands of head roaming wild, and it required only the work of a few efficient cowboys and some herd riding to round up and drive them to market.

With the growth of the cattle industry a new avenue of adventurous life was opened to young Americans, and the ranks of the cowboys was swelled from every direction. Color and romance were characteristics of the wild life of the Texas cowboy in the boundless hills, valleys and prairies where roamed the wild cattle among the mesquite and grama grass.

Here, in the hurly burly of the great dust-swathed roundups, the thundering stampedes, the long hard drives to market and the wild carousals at the trail's-end towns, was molded a new breed of men. Hard, tough and courageous, shirking no danger or handicap, the American cowboy forged from the steel of his own character, a reputation which endures to the present day.

NEXT WEEK:
KIT CARSON TAKES A MESSAGE

SIDEWINDER'S SMOKE SCREEN

BY WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

A PURPLE sun looked down upon Ten Sands Basin, shining through the pall of smoke that hung motionless above the valley. For two days the east wind had hurled a raging inferno across the Big Elbows, then died out this afternoon, and victory had finally come to the blackened, sweat-crusted cowpunchers who for over forty hours had turned fire

fighters. But victory was not in the eyes of the little group of ranchers who stood beside the corral gate of the Circle A.

Ten thousand acres of cut-over land and scrub timber of the foothills had been swept clean, and with it had gone the summer pasture that was vital to the ranchers of Ten Sands Basin. They stood there, these men, tight-lipped and hard-eyed, watching the sporadic columns of smoke that lifted from charred snags to disappear into the motionless haze that hung above them. For long minutes they had stood in silence, the sultry silence of men in whom the bitter passion of hate has been running deep and strong.

A little removed from the others, Bob Weemer, owner of the Circle A, was leaning against a corral post. He was the youngest man there, somewhere in his middle twenties. Not tall nor especially thick of shoulder, his build was deceptive. Underneath the loose folds of his shirt and the Levis that hung from slender hips was a perfectly proportioned body made strong by hard work and clean living.

Of all the men here, Bob Weemer had suffered most. The fire had cleaned the hills above his Circle A as slick as a bear's tooth, and it was upon these hills that he had expected to run his stock for the next three months. He was nursing his pipe between his teeth now, and already he was figuring how many steers he would have to sell to buy the extra hay that would be needed to bring the rest of his stock through the winter.

The far-away peep of a donkey whistle, coming to them from the unburned hills that lay farther south, made every man stiffen.

"The dirty damned coyotes," Erp Nagel's surly voice broke the silence, "they go right ahead with their logging while we twiddle our thumbs and look at a bunch of black hills."

"Pichon laid his men off for a couple of days to help us fight fire," Dad Holman said reasoningly. "There ain't no danger now. He might as well put 'em back to work."

"Sure," Nagel growled sullenly, "they've already let hell loose on us. It was probably that same donkey we just heard yapping up there that started the fire. It's only June now. In a couple of months it might have taken the whole damned Basin."

"Oh, I dunno." Holman scratched a wind-wrinkled cheek. "I reckon we can always stop a grass fire here in the Flat."

Nagel hadn't heard. He was rubbing the point of his sharp chin, and a sudden idea had fired his pale-blue eyes.

"There's only one way to save our bacon," he said. He ran his eyes around the semicircle of men. "We oughta raid their camp, bust up their equipment, and drive Pichon and his damned loggers clear to hell-an'-gone."

"That's right," Cal Yerby agreed, "this is a cattle country and those cussed loggers've got no business in here."

"Pichon's got more'n a hundred men," Weemer reminded them.

Nagel turned his blazing eyes to the Circle A owner.

"That's about what I expected out of you, Weemer," he sneered. "You afraid?"

WEEMER took his pipe from his mouth, his gray eyes hardening. "Any time, Nagel," he said softly, "that you think I'm afraid, just loosen up your cutter and come a-smoking."

"Cut it out, you two," Dad Holman broke in. "We ain't getting

anywhere squabbling amongst ourselves. Just what have you got in mind, Bob?"

"I haven't got any more use for Pinchon than anybody else," Weemer said. "Maybe less, but he represents big money and he's tied in with the politicians. Ever since the time of the Medes and the Persians, I reckon, there's been a lot of scrapping between the big guns and the little fellows like us that are just trying to make a living, but you'll notice that most of the time the big guns won. The minute we start shooting, we're setting the law against us."

His words were a dam to the rising current of passion, and he saw reason come back into their faces.

"Well, what are we gonna do?" asked Yerby.

"I don't know yet," Weemer admitted. "So far, the rest of you haven't been hurt much. Nagel, your summer grazing is in the Little Elbows. I never did see an Enbar steer over here. Just why are you so set on lifting Pichon's scalp?"

"Any decent, fighting cowman would want to get Pichon!" Nagel shouted. "Logging and cattle raising don't mix in this country, and you know it damned well. Course he ain't hurt me yet, but he's working around to the Little Elbows. Purty soon he'll be over there cutting in my back yard."

He glared at Weemer, as edgy as a tomcat on a clothesline. A little too edgy, Bob Weemer thought. He didn't know much about logging, but he did know that the Little Elbow range was considerably lower in altitude than their big brothers across the basin, and for that reason the pines that studded their slopes were small, scrawny trees, and hardly worth the efforts of a big outfit like Abe Pichon's.

"Well," said Cal Yerby, "I think we ought to do something, if it's only to throw the fear of the Almighty into Pichon."

Weemer knocked his pipe against a corral bar. "Think I'll ride into Catlow this afternoon, and have a talk with him."

"Talk!" Nagel exploded. "Hell's fire, you must think you got a silver tongue to talk to Abe Pichon!"

Ever since Erp Nagel had bought the Enbar three years ago there had been bad blood between him and Bob Weemer. Weemer's father had been a pioneer and the accepted leader in Ten Sands Basin, and when he had died, Bob's deep honesty and steadiness had brought him much of that leadership, something Nagel had never accepted.

Weemer turned to his chestnut gelding that stood ground hitched behind him, and swung into the saddle."

"Well," he said lightly, "if I don't come back, you can call at Pichon's office for the remains."

Concern showed in Dad Holman's face. "Better be a mite careful, son. He's a tough hombre, that Pichon. And Nig Saul's just plumb mean."

"The tougher they are, the longer they bounce," Weemer grinned, and turned his mount toward Catlow.

IT was three o'clock by the time he reached town. He rode down the one business street, his horse's hoofs plopping softly in the thick dust. For a generation Catlow had been a drowsy cattle town, then the railroad had come, and with it Pichon and his loggers to slaughter the timber that grew along the rounded shoulders of the Big Elbows.

The usual crowd had followed the loggers into Catlow, professional gamblers, percentage girls and hard-

cases who had turned the town into a roaring hell. Even now, in the middle of a week-day afternoon, the street throbbed with the racket of tinny pianos and drunken shouts from the half dozen saloons that lifted their pretentious fronts close to the dust strip.

Weemer frowned his disapproval as he tied his horse to the rack in front of Derby's store. The raucousness of this once peaceful town was disturbing to him, and already it had taken its toll. One of his punchers had been shot in a gun brawl in Swede's Place. Another had been so badly beaten up in a fight with logger that he couldn't ride for a week. All this because Abe Pichon was filling his pocket with the natural wealth of Ten Sands Basin. In a year, Pichon would be gone, leaving the mountains covered with snags, dead treetops, and uprooted brush that would be a constant fire hazard for a generation.

Weemer shifted his gun belt so that the holster hung a little farther front, and went into the new building which housed Pichon's office and a general store. There had been a lot of talk about the business boom that the logging would bring to Catlow, and Pichon had made a patent effort to cultivate the townspeople, but from the first his attitude toward the cattlemen had been one of contempt.

A long counter extended across the front of the room, and behind it a half dozen clerks were working. Presently a slick-haired man stepped up to the counter.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"I'd like to see Mr. Pichon."

"Sorry. He's out at the camp right now."

"Thanks." Weemer strode outside.

As he started to untie his horse, he heard someone shout his name. Turning, he saw Sheriff Sam Teeple who was standing in front of his office.

"I want to talk to you a minute, Bob," the sheriff called.

Weemer crossed the street to the jail, an old log structure that dated back to the days when Catlow was only a trail-spraddling cow town. The sheriff's office was in front of the building.

Teeple motioned for Weemer to sit down, and, leaning back in his swivel chair, cocked his feet across a battered desk. He'd been sheriff for twenty years, a little paunchy now and his hair was shot with gray, but he was still a good lawman.

"I reckon you was tryin' to find Pichon," he said thoughtfully.

"That's right."

"I guess some of you ranchers are pretty hot under the collar about the fire."

"Maybe we got a right to be sore," Weemer suggested. "Do you know how that fire started?"

Teeple nodded. "I did some nosing around. Near as I can find out, it was a spark from one of Pichon's donkeys, but I can't be sure. None of the men will talk."

"That's the way we figure. We've got to do something, and we will, although just what I don't know until I have a powwow with Pichon. He's mighty damned careless, just because it's the cheapest way, and he's leaving the country in a mess. After he's gone, we've still got to make our living here."

"I know." Teeple looked out of the window, a worried frown on his broad face. "This is a cow country, and mainly it always will be."

"That's our water shed, sheriff," Weemer continued. "If it goes, our

creeks will be dryer'n a bone before the fall rains."

"I know that, too," Teeple brought his eyes back to the other man's. "But it wouldn't be smart for you boys to take the law into your own hands. I don't want a war breaking out. I've written to the State capital, so maybe we can get some regulations."

"We won't get any help from the politicians, sheriff." Weemer stood up. "Guess I'll ride along and see if I can run our coyote down."

"If we really get anything on Pichon, we'll take care of him legal, but remember, no shooting," the lawman warned.

"Don't worry," Weemer grinned. "I'll handle him with gloves."

PICHON was logging on the ridge above Lolo Creek, and the camp lay in the canyon. This was the stream which furnished water for Dad Holman's M Quarter Circle and flowed into Thunder River three miles above Catlow.

It was after six when Weemer rode into camp, and men were drifting down from the ridge which had been stripped almost naked by their work, burly-chested, whiskered loggers wearing their hobbed, flat-heeled boots.

Weemer felt a little sick as he looked up at the freshly scarred mountainside, the deep troughs dug by descending logs, the welter of limbs, tops, and torn brush. Broken snags still stood, their tips pointing upward, silent dead monuments to the greed of man. It was these mountains that Bob Weemer loved more than the open land of the Basin floor. Here he liked to hunt, to fish the crystal pools of the creeks, or just to lie on his back in the thick shade of a pine and gaze upward into the myriad patterns of needles. He'd never do that again along Lolo Creek.

In the center of the camp was a shack with the one word, "Office," scrawled above the door. Just as Weemer dismounted, two men came out. One of them was small with coal-black hair and eyes that seemed almost as dark, a narrow, sharply pointed nose, and a thin-lipped mouth that had a way of snapping shut like the click of a steel trap. The other was huge with inordinately thick shoulders and long arms. He stooped a little as he walked, and looked like a tremendous gorilla. The little man was Abe Pichon, the big one his bodyguard, Nig Saul.

"Hello, Weemer," Pichon said. There was no warmth in his dark eyes. "I been expecting some of you cow nurses to show up."

"You had good reason to," drawled Weemer. "I was just wondering if you knew how that fire started."

"Well, now, I couldn't say." Pichon shook his head innocently.

"I'll tell you what we think. Because you're so damned careless or maybe just cheap, you use equipment that might cause a fire every minute you're working. We figure that fire started from a spark out of one of your donkeys."

"Got any proof?" Pichon grinned. "And if you have, what can you do about it? We haven't broken any laws."

"That may be right," Weemer admitted. "As far as your pals in the State capital are concerned, you're above laws, but maybe you didn't know that this fire's gonna cost us considerable dinero buying hay that wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't been criminally careless. That's all been done, but what we want to know is whether you're going to do any different from now on."

"No, Weemer." Pichon seemed slightly amused. "Can't say I am. I've got to get these logs out the cheapest way I can."

"Then maybe you'd be interested in knowing there's considerable fight talk among the ranchers. You're mighty damned unpopular in the Basin."

"Just where's this fight talk coming from?"

"Maybe a friend of yours," Weemer said significantly. "A gent that hasn't been hurt, yet."

PICHON took a long cigar from his pocket and rolled it slowly between his fingers.

"I wasn't aware that I had any friends among the ranchers," he said indifferently. "But you might consider this. I've got as tough a bunch of buckos up here as you'll find this side of hell, and we got enough rifles to go around. If you want fight, you'll get it—plenty."

Something snapped in Bob Weemer then. The casual indifference of this man to the destruction he had caused, broke the tight leash he had held upon his temper, and words boiled out in a stream of savage fury.

"You're lower than any sidewinder that ever crawled, Pichon! You're a money-grubbing skunk. You wreck the country that's given us a living, and then stand there smirking, you damned sneaking little coyote."

Pichon slowly struck a match and lit his cigar. He puffed several times, and blew out the match.

"Maybe you gents need a lesson," he said, his voice grating like the sound of a file on steel. He looked at Saul who had been standing behind him. "Get him, Nig!"

Saul came on in a mad charge. Weemer was almost caught in surprise. It was Abe Pichon he wanted to lay his hands on, but he might have known Pichon wasn't a man to do his own fighting.

Weemer side-stepped and flicked a right to Saul's cheek as the big man went by. That was the way Saul fought, bull-like rushes with fists flaying. Take a dozen blows in order to land one. Weemer knew that, knew that one square punch from those hamlike hands would end the fight, so he ducked, side-stepped, retreated, anything to prevent that one blow from coming home. Every time the big man came within reach, Weemer dealt out punishment. He closed one eye, slashed a cheek to ribbons, caught Saul's lower lip and brought a crimson stream down the giant's chin. But still the bull-like rushes came.

A crowd had gathered, but Weemer was hardly aware of them. He took blows that he couldn't dodge, but he turned his shoulders into them or let his forearms take the shock. Once Saul almost caught him in a bear hug, but Weemer straightened his head with a left and went under the clutching arms.

Then Saul started to circle, his breath coming in uneven pants. He didn't know quite what to do. This Weemer was as elusive as a flea. Suddenly he charged again, came to a stomping stop and whipped up a knee that almost caught his opponent in the belly. Weemer turned enough to take it on his hip, but it shoved him off balance, and one of Saul's fists smashed into the side of his face, a clublike blow as punishing as the down swing of a sledge handle.

Weemer went back and down. Something exploded before his eyes, and his head felt as if it had been struck by the trunk of a falling pine. He heard someone yell, "Give him the boot, Nig!" glimpsed Saul bear-

ing down, saw the swing of the heavy toe. He whirled his body over, feeling the brush of air as the boot missed, came up in time to catch Saul's foot and dump him on his back, a jarring fall that sent the big man's breath out of him in a sharp whistle.

If Weemer had wanted to copy Saul's tactics, he could have used his own boot then, and caved in the giant's ribs, but that wasn't his way. He waited until Saul staggered to his feet, looking toward Pichon as a beaten dog looks to his master, the fight gone from his battered face.

It was Weemer's time to rush now. He slashed a punch at Saul's beefy throat, and as the big man gave way, kept boring in, a savage, relentless charge, the air filled with the meaty echoes of his blows. Then his right swung flush to Saul's jaw. There was a snapping sound like that of a breaking twig, and the giant's knees gave way. He sagged to the earth, a sodden, motionless hulk of flesh, and lay there on his face.

Pichon stared unbelievingly at his fallen fighter, but no word passed his lips as Weemer slowly walked to his horse and painfully pulled himself into the saddle. Somebody in the crowd gasped, "Zowie, what a fight!"

Saul was sitting up, shaking his head dazedly. Pichon turned to look at Weemer. "You're a fighting man, cowboy," he said reluctantly. But from now on, stay away from here."

Weemer whirled his chestnut and started down the road. Once he looked back, saw the beaten giant still sitting on the ground, and heard Pichon's biting voice. "You aren't a fighter any more, Nig. You're fired!"

Somehing of a grin was on Weemer's face as he put his gelding to a faster walk.

IT was nearly dark when Weemer rode into Dad Holman's M Quarter Circle, but not so dark that Dad couldn't see the condition of his face.

"Well, dad gum my mangy hide!" Holman ejaculated. "Had a set-to with a buzzsaw?"

"Yeah." Weemer ran a tongue over his lips. "One of Pichon's."

"Nig Saul?"

Weemer nodded.

A slow grin came to Holman's weathered face. "How'd you leave him?"

"He was sitting on the ground when I left."

"And Erp Nagel figured you was afraid," the oldster crowed. "By cracky, wished I could've seen it. Climb down off that bronc and let's patch you up."

A towel and cold water made Weemer feel like a different man, but his shoulders were stiff and sore. Dad Holman tried to get him to eat, but he only took a cup of coffee.

"You know," Holman leaned back and frowned thoughtfully, "the government's put these mountains into a national forest, and regulates the amount of stock we can run up there. Seems like they'd have something to say about the way the logging's done."

"Pichon isn't in the national forest," Weemer said wearily.

"No, I reckon that's mostly State land, and maybe some sections he bought himself, but seems like a fire might spread back into the national forest."

Weemer sat up, a new interest in his eyes.

"By gosh," he said and stood up, "maybe you hit something there, Dad. I'm gonna get Jim Clemens down here. These United States forest rangers are made out of different stuff than the State officials that

Pichon pushes around. Now I'd better be moseying along home."

The next morning Weemer rode into town and sent a telegram to Jim Clemens briefly describing the situation and asking him to come to Catlow. This was Wednesday. Clemens ought to be here by Friday.

Weemer met the afternoon train on Friday, but there was no Jim Clemens. There was a night train, but now the ranger likely wouldn't come until Saturday. At any rate, Abe Pichon had made no hostile moves. Weemer expected something. When he'd licked Nig Saul, he'd practically declared war, and Pichon wasn't a man to let that pass.

Erp Nagel rode into the Circle A just before dusk, his face dark with unrestrained passion. Weemer saw him coming and met him in front of the house.

"Syd Balmer got into Catlow at noon," Nagel said directly. "He hadn't been in town two hours until he shot Cal Yerby."

Syd Balmer, the meanest, toughest gun-slinger in the State who'd hire his guns out to anybody who'd pay the price! And the only man in Ten Sands Basin who'd pay that price, was Abe Pichon. Weemer had expected a big dose of trouble, but he hadn't figured on Pichon importting a hired killer.

"How'd it happen?" he asked.

"Balmer jumped him in Swede's Place. He prodded him into making a try, and shot him before he even cleared leather. Hell, Yerby never was no gun fighter." Nagel's eyes narrowed as he looked at Weemer. "You kept us from fighting the other day, Weemer, then you went up to camp and knocked Nig Saul all over the place. Now Pichon figures he's go to wipe us out; so he brings in Balmer, and Yerby's the first to go. I'd kind o' lay that killing right to your door."

Weemer stared at Nagel, hard anger suddenly riding him at the unfairness of the accusation.

"Well, we're fighting now," Nagel continued inflexibly. "You can stay out here and hide if you want to. If you show up in Catlow, Balmer'll gun you just like he did Yerby. I'm staying out of town until tomorrow night. I'm going to see the rest of the ranchers, and we're going into Catlow and hang Pichon to the first limb we can find. I reckon they'll listen now, after what's happened."

Weemer's mind was racing. Something here wasn't right. Every logger on Pichon's pay roll would be in town on Saturday night, and the cowmen would be so far outnumbered they wouldn't have a chance in the world to get Pichon.

"Well," Nagel bellowed, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I reckon," Weemer said softly, "what I do is my own damned business, but I sure won't lead a bunch of men to hell like you're talking about."

"I always said you was yellow!" Nagel whirled his horse and thundered away.

WEEMER stood staring after him. Nagel's plan was worse than crazy. Catlow would become a shambles, and dozens of men would die, all for no purpose and the cattlemen of Ten Sands Basin would be broken. Nagel had some devilish scheme, but Weemer couldn't see just what it was, unless—he caught his breath—the Enbar owner aimed to spread out over the Basin when the energies of the ranchers were spent fighting Abe Pichon. Whatever his plan was, Erp Nagel was playing both ends against the middle.

There was one way to stop it, and that was to get Syd Balmer. Weemer went into the house and took a second gun belt off the wall and strapped it on. He wasn't a two-gun man, but he'd seen plenty of times when two Colts were twice as good as one.

He didn't say anything about his intentions to his own men, but he did stop at Dad Holman's Quarter Circle M.

"Nagel's on the prod again," Weemer said, "but in case I'm not around tomorrow, don't let him start anything until Jim Clemens gets here."

Holman nodded. "Just what are you doing, wearing two guns tonight?"

"I'm hunting coyotes," Weemer grinned, and before Holman could say anything else, dug in his spurs and headed for Catlow.

There was no definite plan in his head except to find Syd Balmer. If the gunman had been brought here by Abe Pichon, Bob Weemer would be the man he'd want most to meet.

The usual night crowd was in Catlow. Two lines of horses were racked along both sides of the street. Yellow light from the windows of the saloons dropped across the dust. The air was hideous with the mingled shouts and raucous laughter that rose above the steady jangle of pounded pianos.

It wasn't Bob Weemer's way to plunge into anything blindly, and he well knew how much the odds were against him in facing the smoking guns of Syd Balmer, but if he had a chance to stop the slaughter of men tomorrow, that chance was worth the taking.

Calmly he tied his horse to the pole in front of Swede's Place and began his search. In none of the saloons, however, could he find a strange man who looked like a gunslinger. That was queer, because the natural place to find Balmer was in a saloon.

As Weemer came out of the last place, a vicious dive on a back street, he stopped in surprise. There, almost lost in the darkness, was Nagel's big roan tied to the rack. That was queer, too, for he hadn't seen Nagel. Evidently the Enbar owner hadn't wanted his mount discovered.

There were two places left to look. Balmer might be holed up in the hotel, or maybe he was having a powwow with Pichon in his office. The hotel turned up a blank.

"No, Balmer ain't here," the clerk shook his head. "Dunno where he's staying."

Weemer walked the two blocks to Pichon's office, and saw that the windows were lighted. Inside, his head bent over a desk, was the slick-haired clerk he'd talked to before. Weemer went in. The man looked up, frowned, then got to his feet. Weemer didn't stop. He went around the counter and started toward the door marked "Private."

"Wait a minute," the clerk said. "Mr. Pichon's busy. You can't go in there."

He stepped in front of Weemer, but he might as well have tried to stop a stampede by waving a handkerchief at it. Weemer hit him, just once, but that was square on the point of the chin. The clerk went back against the wall and tottered there a second, then started to slide to the floor. Weemer caught his body and lowered it gently. There had hardly been a sound, not enough to disturb the men inside Pichon's private office.

With his hand on the doorknob, Weemer paused. He could hear men's voices.

"I don't like to do it," Pichon was saying stubbornly. "I think I'll just stay out at the camp for a while. They won't come after me there. If I bring my boys into Catlow, there'll be a lot of men killed."

"Hell," another voice cut in, "you both sound kind o' scared of this Weemer jigger. Just let me get a crack at him. That's what I'm being paid for, ain't it, Nagel?"

"Sure. But Weemer's cagy," Nagel growled. "Him and Holman are getting everybody riled against you, Pichon. Weemer won't show up alone. He'll be rodding the outfit tomorrow night, and they'll wreck everything you got, Pichon. I say you've got to arm your men and be ready for 'em, right here in Catlow."

In that instant a number of things became clear in Bob Weemer's mind. He jerked the door open, and for a second stood in the opening, his eyes taking in the scene before him.

Abe Pichon was seated behind his desk. Nagel was to his right, and on the other side was a stranger, a tall, sharp-featured man, his slender fingers brushing the worn butts of a pair of six-guns that rode on his lean hips. There was a queer naked look about the upper part of his face because of the almost invisible eyebrows above his slate-blue eyes. This would be Syd Balmer.

FOR a time there was no word nor movement. They were as still, these four, as if carved from marble. All color had gone from Erp Nagel's face. It was as if he had read the death message in Bob Weemer's eyes, and knew that the sand in the hour glass of his life had run out. Then Weemer spoke, and his words were a scourging lash of flame.

"Nagel, you low-down, scummy double-crosser! Telling Pichon we were gonna bust down on him while you were the one doing all the war talk. You made us think it was Pichon hired this killer to gun the rest of us like he did Yerby, and all the time it was you."

Pichon looked at Nagel, sudden comprehension showing in his eyes. Nagel made no answer to Weemer's words. He sat straight-backed and stiff, and ran his tongue tip over dry lips. Balmer eased himself out of his chair, a lazy, indolent motion as if it were all in a day's work.

"What're we waiting for?" he asked, and his hand streaked for his gun.

It came then, the rolling thunder of gunfire, shattering the sultry quiet with the snarl of lead-winged feet. It was action now, action that gave escape to the pent-up fury that had been suppressed in Bob Weemer all these days. He felt the kick of the gun butt against the hard palm of his hand, saw Nagel's head go back in the queer, stricken way of a man who has been struck a mortal blow.

A bullet screamed past Weemer's head, another ripped into the door panel and a ragged splinter slashed his cheek. But his own gun was seeking Balmer now. The hammer fell again and then again. The gunman flinched as a Colt dropped from paralyzed fingers and skidded across the floor. Then it was still while the echoes of crashing guns died. Balmer was holding a crimson hand in front of him and the other arm dangled grotesquely at his side. Pichon was standing at the edge of his desk, both hands in view, empty.

"What did you kick that chair against me for, Pichon?" Balmer roared. "I'd've got him sure."

Then Weemer saw what had happened. The chair that Balmer had been sitting in lay on the floor behind him.

"I didn't have a gun," Pichon said apologetically to the cowman. "That was all I could do."

Balmer sat down, a yellow, sick look on his face. He stared at the blood dripping from his hand.

"I reckon I won't be holding a gun for a while," he said. "One slug breaks my left arm and another one slices up my right hand. Nice shooting, fella." He looked at Nagel's body crumpled on the floor. "He wasn't much good in a tight. Plumb useless."

Men poured into the front office, their faces grave with anxiety.

"If they've got Bob," Holman shouted. "I'll—"

They stopped in the open doorway of Pichon's office, Sheriff Teeple, Jim Clemens, Dad Holman, and several other cattlemen.

"It's all right." Weemer stopped Holman's motion toward his gun when he saw Pichon. "Nagel was kind o' egging him on."

"What you got to say, Balmer?" Teeple demanded.

"I don't mind talking," Balmer said sourly. "I just work at this business, and Nagel wasn't much to work for. He aimed to get Pichon and the ranchers into a ruckus, and tomorrow night when you was having it out, he was gonna swipe a bunch of M Quarter Circle beef and run 'em through the Little Elbows, then butcher 'em and sell 'em to the mining camps over on the other side. Then if Pichon cleaned the ranchers out, he could do a little branding, and have the whole Basin to run his stock in."

"The damned heller!" Holman whispered in astonishment. "Then it wasn't Pichon that hired you?"

"Not me," Pichon said. He sat down on the desk and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Guess I been kind o' proddy, but I've always had trouble wth ranchers wherever I was logging on summer rangeland, and I just kind o' figured you gents were my natural enemies. Then when Nagel came around with his talk about how you were going to burn me out and maybe hang me, I believed it. I see you sent for Clemens."

"I just got word from Washington," the ranger said, stepping up. "We've got a new arrangement now that you and your political pals won't find quite so easy to manage. These forest areas adjacent to the national reserves are being put under our protection. We're calling them protective areas, and anybody logging there has to obey the same regulations as if you were cutting in a national forest. You're going to have to change some of your ways, Pichon."

"That's swell, Jim," Weemer said. "Now about this fire—"

"It didn't come from one of my donkeys," Pichon broke in. "I could have told you that before, only I didn't take to being bulldozed. Somebody set it, probably Nagel."

"Sure Nagel set it," Balmer put in. "He told me he wanted to get the cattlemen riled enough to fight."

In the silence that followed, Weemer looked at Pichon quizzically. "Reckon you saved my life when you kicked that chair against Balmer. Why did you do it?"

"I kind o' like fighting men," Pichon said with a grin. "Even when they've got such poor judgment they waste their time nursing cows!"

THE END

HUNGRY LOOPS SWING WIDE

By WALT COBURN

WS—4D

CHAPTER I

BRAND CHANGERS

For the better part of a week Bill Greer had been hiding up there at Window Rock, waiting. Now it looked like his patience was going to be rewarded. He squatted on his boot heels, his brown paper cigarette cold between his lips, his eyes focused on the little scene that was being enacted below him on the flat stretch of Mesquite Mesa.

Two cowpunchers had jumped a bunch of wild cattle that had been bushed-up. They singled out one of the bunch, a big steer, and took in after it, dodging and twisting through the brush.

The steer hit a small clearing and the men closed in with a quick burst of speed, loops swinging. The race was swift, brief. One man roped the steer by the head. The second man picked up its hind legs with a deft, skilled loop. They stretched the animal out, hogtied it and released their saddle ropes.

A puzzled frown puckered Bill Greer's heavy black brows. The cowpunchers were not building any branding fire. Instead, both seemed to be doing nothing but examining the brand on the steer's left ribs.

Then the smaller of the two, a waddy so slightly built that Bill Greer was convinced he was no more than a boy, got on his horse and rode to a high knoll that overlooked the flat, brush and cactus-spotted mesa. Acting as lookout for the man who was bent over the hogtied steer doing something, Bill Greer reckoned, to the brand on the critter's ribs.

For perhaps twenty or thirty minutes the man worked over the steer, and the rider on the hill stood guard. Then the man working on the steer straightened from his work and went to the animal's head. He would be changing the earmarks now. That simple task took only a minute or two. The job done, he jerked loose the hogging string, tailed the steer to its feet, headed it for the brush, and mounted his horse. He waved his hat and the lookout rode down from the high knoll and joined him. They rode off together, heading south in the direction of the Santell ranch on the Mexican border.

Bill Greer kept his eye on the steer and saw it join the other cattle again. He watched the two riders until they were lost to sight. Then he saddled his horse and rode down the steep trail from Window Rock on the mountain.

Half an hour later he located the little bunch of cattle. They scattered at his approach, running. Cows and calves, a couple of yearlings, two or three steers. One big white-faced steer limped a little, ringing its tail, still half on the prod from its recent manhandling.

Greer took in after it, his loop cocked back over his shoulder. He waited till the steer hit a little clear space, then spurred his horse close. His loop sped out and he caught the steer by its head and a foreleg. He swung his horse sharply to the left. The big steer somersaulted, turned over, landed on its back and side with a thud.

Greer quit his horse, his rope in his hand. He hogtied the animal in what would have been close to rodeo-record time. He was breathing a little hard as he released his catch rope from the steer. Then he examined the brand on its left ribs, and a slow grin spread across his tanned, blunt-featured face, covered now by a week's stubble of dust-powdered black whiskers.

"Even if I had a place to hide

you," he muttered to himself, "I've got no time to break you to lead. You're a beef steer and you'd have to die some day before long, anyhow."

HE slid his six-shooter from its holster. Holding the muzzle of the gun in behind one freshly cropped ear, he pulled the trigger. The explosion sounded cannon-loud in Bill Greer's ears. The steer kicked in its death throes, then was still.

Bill ejected the empty shell from his six-shooter and, reloading the gun, shoved it back in its holster. He opened the big blade of his jackknife and with quick, careful slashes cut out the recently "worked" brand that covered a square foot or more of its hide.

Then he ripped open the jugular vein in front of the briskit to bleed the dead steer, twisted its head back and rolled the animal on its back. He had shoved the cut-out brand into the deep pocket of his brush-scarred leather chaps. Now, with the long, keen-edged blade of his jackknife he began skinning the beef.

Bill Greer worked swiftly, dexterously. And as he worked he kept watching the ears of his big sorrel horse. Suddenly the sorrel's head lifted, ears forward. Bill straightened, listening. He could hear riders coming.

"The shot come from over this way fu'ther, Dude!" a man's voice called out.

Bill ran to his horse and swung into the saddle. He spurred the sorrel into a run. A brief glimpse over his shoulder showed him a rider some distance behind him. The man sighted him, yelled something. A bullet whined past Bill's head, missing him by too narrow a margin.

Bill swung the big sorrel off through the patches of brush. Another rider had joined the first, and they were shouting at each other. Bill Greer grinned faintly as he left them behind.

He rode straight south until he reached a trail that dropped from the mesa into a long barranca. He took this trail down the slant and at the foot of the slope he turned west. An hour later he had reached his camp, hidden in the rough hills. It was not much of a camp; a couple of blankets, a coffeepot and skillet, some grub in a couple of greasy canvas sacks. Bill swung off the big sorrel and turned it loose, slapping it affectionately on the rump.

"You kin go back to your pasture on the Cross range where I swiped you, geldin'," he grinned. "You done a first-rate job. I'm obliged."

He saddled his own bald-faced black gelding and hid his camp outfit in some brush. Taking off his big black Stetson, he buried it, covering the place with leaves and brush. The hat he now put on was old, of a smaller type, its light-gray color stained by sweat and dust, its brim pulled out of shape from hard usage.

Mounting the gelding, Bill Greer headed south. He struck a wagon trail that led to the Santell ranch and followed it. He stopped once along the trail, riding half a mile or so through the cactus and brush. In a few minutes he came to a giant saguaro cactus, the thick trunk of which rose to a height of about thirty feet. He had wrapped the cut-out brand in a piece of canvas. This he now shoved into a large hole made by woodpeckers in the saguaro trunk. It was above shoulder height as he stood in his stirrups.

The brand cached, Bill threaded

his way back through mesquite and cactus to the trail that would bring him to the Santell ranch on the Mexican border.

He had taken pains to wash all the spattered steer blood from his chaps and boots and faded-blue

denim brush jacket. There was nothing about his appearance to identify him with the black-hatted man on the sorrel horse who had killed a steer with the Cross brand worked into the Santell Window brand. The two men who had sighted him had gotten no better than a hundred-yard glimpse of him. Bill Greer told himself that he was as safe as if he had spent the morning in jail to provide himself with an alibi.

During the week he had spent in this part of the cow country he had worn the big black hat and had ridden the big sorrel he had taken from the Cross pasture without the owner's permission. If any man had sighted him they would have him identified in their minds as such. Now the black hat was buried; the sorrel horse was somewhere on its way to the Cross ranch.

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE AT WINDOW RANCH

IT was nearing noon when Bill Greer rode down the valley along the dry Saguaro River and sighted the adobe buildings and corrals that made up the Santell Window Ranch.

The Santell outfit was one Bill knew only by reputation, and that reputation was none too savory. Zeke Santell was in jail right now waiting trial on a murder charge. His son Sam, a kid still in his teens, was said to be as fast a cowboy as ever built a maverick-hungry loop on a neighbor's range.

The top hand and straw boss of the Window outfit was a border jumper who had been dodging law officers on both sides of the Mexican line for the past ten years. He went under the name of Jake Johns now and had been heard to boast that it was his real name, at that, though he hadn't used it since he was run out of Texas fifteen years before.

Bill Greer was certain he had never met Zeke and Sam Santell. About Jake Johns he couldn't be certain. He might have met the man somewhere when Jake Johns was traveling under some other name. That was a chance, Bill Greer told himself, that he would have to risk. But Bill Greer's life was made up of risks. Danger was food and drink to the black-haired, gray-eyed, tall, easy-grinning cowpuncher.

He had heard that the Santell outfit was not in the habit of welcoming strangers with any degree of cordiality. He expected no warm hospitality now as he rode up to the barn where half a dozen men, two of them on horseback, the others on foot, were gathered just outside the open barn doors.

A badge pinned to the flannel shirt of one of the mounted men caught the reflection of the sun. Bill Greer's faint grin tightened. Tiny specks of light showed in his narrowed gray eyes as he sized up the situation.

The two men on horseback quit talking to eye Bill coldly as he rode

up. The men on foot scowled at him suspiciously.

"And who in hell are you?" asked a tall, towheaded man who was one of the group on foot. His eyes, pale blue under straw-colored brows, were bleak. "Another thick-headed, lyin' John Law that's tryin' to hang this beef butcherin' on us?"

"We'll ask the questions around here, Jake," said the big, red-mustached man who wore the deputy-sheriff badge. His greenish eyes, close set under shaggy brows, studied Bill closely. "Who are you and where'd you just come from?" he asked peremptorily.

"My name is Bill Greer, if that means anything. I'm from New Mexico. A stranger ridin' the grub line in a strange land."

"And headed," added the law officer meaningly, "for the Mexican line. Where'd you steal that horse?"

Bill Greer's eyes narrowed. "Does that law badge you got pinned to your shirt give you the right to call a man a horse thief? This horse wears the Ladder 7 brand. I got a bill of sale from the owner of the Ladder 7 for him. And if you're man enough to shed that badge I'll break you from callin' every stranger you meet a horse thief. You began this. Step off your horse and finish it, mister."

Bill Greer swung to the ground, unbuckling the belt and snaps of his chaps and throwing them across his saddle.

"You'd better hope," said the tall, towheaded cowpuncher Bill Greer had figured as Jake Johns, "that Dude Rankin don't call your bet, stranger. I've tried him out, and he's hell on wheels."

"Stay on your horse, Dude," ordered the other rider, a lanky, hawk-beaked, black-eyed man in cowpuncher jumper and chaps who sat a sweaty roan that wore the Cross brand on its left shoulder.

"This gent that calls his name Bill Greer," the big deputy argued, "is makin' war talk, Ken. I'll drag it outta him in about two minutes."

"I said stay on your horse! Take it up another time. You come here to arrest Jake Johns and young Sam Santell. Git the job done and we'll take 'em to Mesa Grande to keep old Zeke company in jail."

WHERE are your warrants?" A woman's voice behind Bill Greer turned him around with a start. "And what are the charges against Jake and my brother?"

Bill saw a girl about twenty. She was small, slender, with black hair that had reddish lights. Her gray eyes were bright with anger. She was wearing a red-checked house dress that had been washed until it was faded. She had come from one of the adobe houses nearby.

"We rode up on 'em while they was butcherin' a Cross beef," explained the law officer. "I didn't sight Sam but I got a look at Jake Johns. He was wearin' that black hat he's got on and was ridin' a big sorrel horse."

"If you didn't sight Sam Santell," said Bill Greer, grinning at the law officer, "you'd have no chance of provin' to a jury and judge that he was there. You got to ketch a man red-handed, and take him and the hide with the brand on it. Leastways that's the law where I come from. I wouldn't be hornin' in here, but I'm still smartin' from that horse-thief business."

Deputy Sheriff Dude Rankin dismounted, peeling off his white buckskin jumper.

"This hombre knows too much for a rank stranger, Ken. Just hold

my horse for a minute or two. An' keep your eye on Jake Johns. If he tries any tricks, shoot him. You're deputized." He unbuckled and handed his ornately carved cartridge belt and white-handled gun in its fancy holster to the man on the Cross horse. "I'm knockin' the ears off this mouthy gent."

"Makin' another one of your big grandstand plays for Sis to watch, ain't you, Dude?"

A tall, lean-muscled youth with thumbs hooked in a sagging cartridge belt eyed the big deputy contemptuously as he put the question. The boy was deeply tanned, his long legs were saddle-bowed, and already there were sun wrinkles at the corners of his hazel eyes. His mouth was too thin-lipped and hard for his age, Bill Greer thought.

"Maybe I am, at that, Sam," said the law officer. "Stick around, Dona, and watch the show."

"I wouldn't think of missing it, Dude," the girl retorted. "I hope he dirties your back." She smiled quickly at Bill Greer. "Trim him, cowboy."

DUDE RANKIN was at least twenty pounds heavier and six inches taller than Bill Greer. He had a longer reach and he had more than a little knowledge of boxing.

But Bill Greer also knew how to handle his fists, and he had speed and footwork that he would need badly if he hoped to win against the bigger man. He unbuckled his spurs and tossed them on the ground with his gun belt and six-shooter. He saw the girl pick them up as Dude Rankin came at him.

Bill side-stepped, ducked the bigger man's swing, landing the first blow on the deputy's nose. Blood spurted, and young Sam Santell let out a whoop.

"Got ten bucks you'd like to bet on your badge-polisher, Ken Cross?" he shouted gleefully.

"Make it a hundred," said Cross. "I don't take money from bald-faced kids, but—"

"A hundred it is," the girl broke in.

"I don't gamble with kids or girls," declared Ken Cross. "Why don't Jake Johns back his man for a hundred?"

"It's a bet," called the Window ramrod. "Watch his right, Greer!"

Bill Greer *was* watching Dude Rankin's right. Also his left. He was trying to keep out of the way of the long arms that shot at him like pistons. One of Rankin's swings caught him alongside the head and Bill felt as if he'd been kicked by a mule. He covered as the bigger man rushed him.

Rankin's sledge-hammer blows drove Bill backward. He tried to cover, catching the force of the blows on his arms and shoulders. He dropped to one knee, Rankin, plowing in, stumbled over him, sprawling headlong. In a flash Bill Greer was back on his feet.

"Kick 'is head in!" yelled Sam Santell.

Bill wiped a smear of blood from his mouth and grinned. Dude was on his feet again, his fancy pearl-gray flannel shirt a smear of blood and dirt. The law officer's nose was gushing blood.

Dude Rankin came in more warily now. He tried to feint Bill off balance. Bill was fighting on the defensive. He had hoped that the big deputy would rush him. But Rankin, for all his red anger, was not losing his head. He was coming after Bill now to batter him down and was taking no chances on the smaller man landing a lucky punch.

"Stand up and fight!" Rankin was breathing hard. His wind was less sound than that of his smaller, faster opponent.

Bill grinned through the blood that smeared his mouth. If he could tire the big son out, wind him, wear him down, he stood a good chance of winning. He kept backing, sidestepping, ducking. Dude Rankin kept following, swinging savagely at the elusive, weaving target that was Bill's head. The big deputy's face was dripping with sweat. His face was flushed a dull red. His wind was going fast. But there was still a lot of steam behind his big, red-haired fists.

The girl and the Window cowpunchers had formed a circle. Ken Cross, his almost swarthy face black with anger, sat his horse, watching. His hand was on his gun.

Dude, winded though he was, followed Bill relentlessly, crowding him backward. Ken Cross swung his restive horse around suddenly in a manner that might or might not have been intentional. Bill Greer, pedaling backward to keep out of range of the big law officer's flailing fists, backed into the horse's rump.

The horse, spooked, lashed out with both hind feet and the shod hoofs caught Bill Greer in the back and the seat of his overalls. Only the fact that he was so close to the horse saved him from a broken back. As it was, he was knocked flat on his face. Knifelike pains stabbed his back. His arms seemed all but paralyzed. Numb. Useless.

DONA SANTELL was the first to reach Bill as he rolled over painfully, trying to get to his feet. She looked up at Cross, her face white with anger.

"If you did that on purpose, Ken Cross"—her voice was low-pitched, trembling—"you're lower than any name I know. And I know a lot of 'em that I could call you. Clear out! Get off this ranch!"

"Hell," said Ken Cross, "it was an accident. This is a bronc I'm forkin'. Gather in Jake Johns and Sam Santell, Dude. Here's your gun."

"I told you before we got here, Ken," growled the big deputy, wiping the blood and dirt from his face and buckling on his gun belt, "we've got nothin' to back up our play. The brand was cut out. If you had that bronc kick this gent on purpose, what Dona just said goes double."

Dude Rankin walked over to where Bill Greer, his face gray with pain, was trying to stand on his feet.

"You fought clean, and you had me about winded, mister," he admitted. "You might have wore me out and licked me. I'd rather you whupped me than git what you did."

Dude held out his hand. Bill had difficulty in raising his right arm. He felt the grip of the deputy's hairy hand.

"Still playin' to the ladies, ain't you, Dude?" Sam Santell's voice was venomous. "It took you and Ken Cross and a bronc to git the job done. You was licked."

Sam turned to Ken Cross. "Our man wins on a foul." His thin-lipped mouth twisted in an ugly line. "Pay up before you ride off."

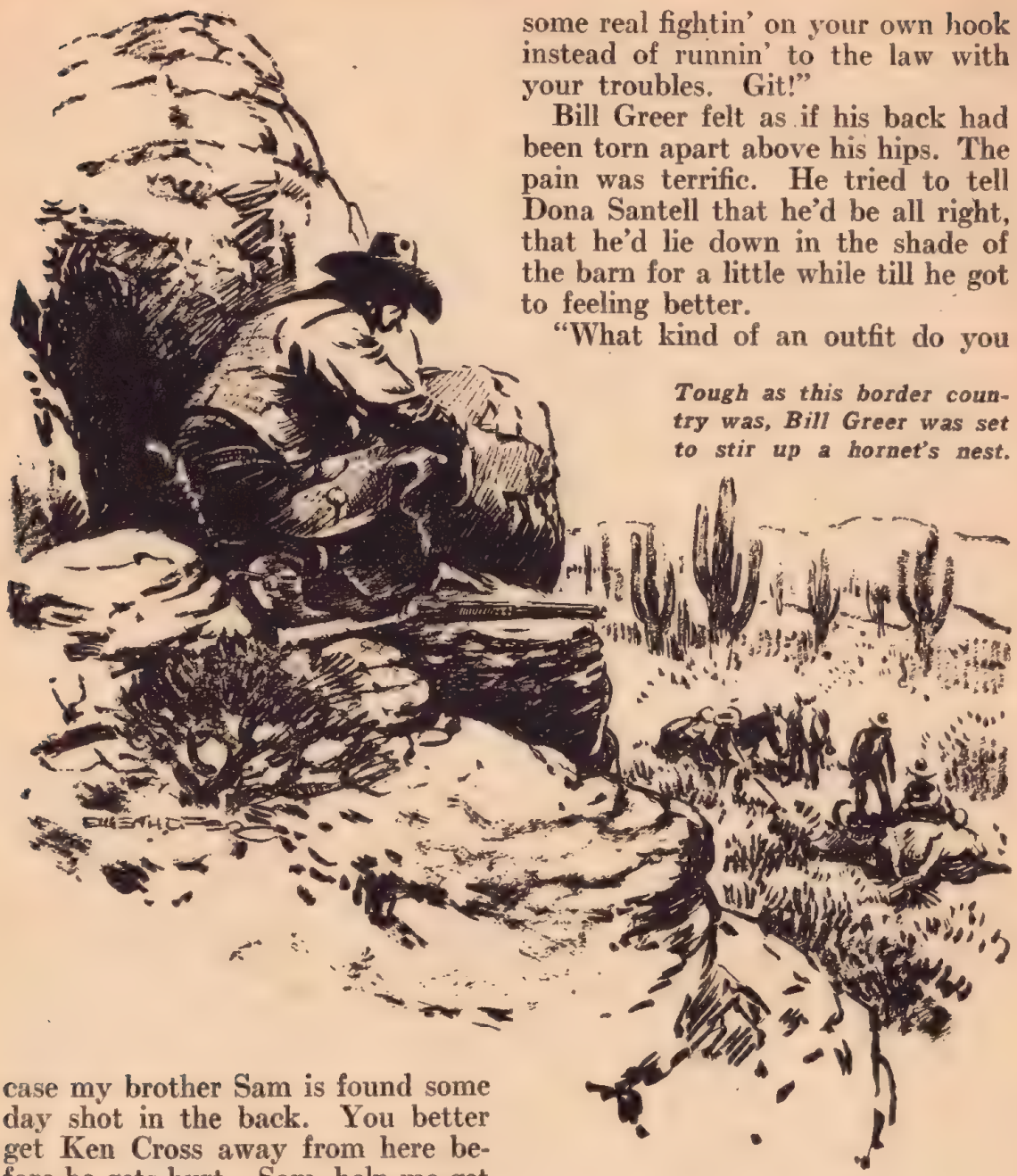
"Some day, you half-baked, would-be tough hand," Ken Cross scowled down from his saddle, "somebody will ketch you when you haven't got your whole outfit to back your talk. That day's gonna be a damned unlucky one for you."

"Just remember that, Dude Rankin," Dona Santell remarked, "in

some real fightin' on your own hook instead of runnin' to the law with your troubles. Git!"

Bill Greer felt as if his back had been torn apart above his hips. The pain was terrific. He tried to tell Dona Santell that he'd be all right, that he'd lie down in the shade of the barn for a little while till he got to feeling better.

"What kind of an outfit do you



Tough as this border country was, Bill Greer was set to stir up a hornet's nest.

case my brother Sam is found some day shot in the back. You better get Ken Cross away from here before he gets hurt. Sam, help me get this cowboy to the house. He's hurt bad."

"Drag it, Dude," Jake Johns ordered. "Git Ken Cross off the Window range. But before you go, git this straight: We didn't butcher ary Cross steer on Mesquite Mesa. When we butcher a Cross beef, we do the job closer to the ranch. Haul your freight, Dude. An' you, Ken Cross, don't set foot on the Window range again till you're ready to do

think we are, anyhow?" Dona demanded as her brother Sam and one of the cowpunchers carried Bill into the main house and put him on a bed in a spare room.

"If he's stopped at Mesa Grande long enough to hear some of the Cross friends tell it," put in Sam, his mouth twisting in a bitter grin, "he'll know what kind of a cattle-

rustlin', tough-hand spread this is."

"Quit it, Sam," said his sister, her eyes angry. "Quit trying to act so tough. Get him undressed while I locate the liniment and that jar of salve and some bandages."

CHAPTER III

HIDDEN EVIDENCE

WHEN Dona had left the room young Sam Santell reached in behind an old Spanish chest and brought out a bottle. He pulled the cork and offered the bottle to Bill.

"Take a big snort, mister," he said. "Quick, before Sis gits back. It's good tequila."

Bill Greer needed a drink to ease the pain in his back. He took a couple of big swallows and handed the bottle back. Sam and the cowpuncher each took a drink. Then the bottle went back to its hiding place.

"Don't tell Sis," Sam warned. "She'd bust the bottle."

The two men got Bill's clothes off and Sam gave him a nightshirt. There were sheets on the bed, and the blankets and patchwork bedspread were fresh and clean. Bill felt foolish being in bed with a nightshirt on.

Dona Santell came in, her hands filled with bandages and some bottles of liniment. With her came a fat Mexican woman.

"Jake wants you at the barn, Sam," she said. "Take Shorty with you. Rosita and I will do this job."

"But looky here," Bill protested, his face reddening, "I'd rather Sam or one of the men—"

"Dona," said Sam Santell, and for a minute a grin wiped away the ugly line of his thin-lipped mouth, "is trainin' to be a nurse. She wouldn't let anybody else work on you for all the cattle in the Cross iron." He went out, his spurs jingling. The cowpuncher called Shorty trailed after him.

Dona Santell, bending over the bed with a soapy wash rag to get the dirt and blood off Bill's face, sniffed.

"Sam fed you a drink, did he? Well, you needed it. I was going to give you one from a bottle I have cached in my medicine chest. Some day that stuff is going to get Sam into real trouble. Now flop over on your stomach and I'll see what damage that Cross bronc did. And don't look so foolish about it. You heard Sam say I was training to be a nurse."

There were no bones broken, but Bill's back was badly bruised and discolored. Dona Santell's hands massaged his back with the liniment and salve. She gave directions to the Mexican woman in her native tongue, which she spoke as fluently as any Mexican. Now and then she would say something to Bill as she worked on his back. When she had finished and had propped some pillows behind his head, she brought him a glass of whiskey.

"You'll be riding in a week," she told him.

"I'll be ridin' tomorrow," he grinned.

"No, you won't, mister," Dona Santell contradicted. "I give the orders around here. Rosita, bring the señor's dinner to him in here."

When the Mexican woman was gone Dona Santell set a jug of water on the table beside the bed and then hung Bill's belt and six-shooter on the bedpost near his head.

"You might feel better if your gun is handy," she told him. "I'll be back about supper time. Ask

Rosita for whatever you need."

A little while later the Mexican woman brought Bill his dinner of soup and meat and beans and fresh vegetables and dried fruit. Later Sam Santell, wearing chaps and carrying a carbine, came in for a drink from his cached bottle. He offered Bill a drink, but Bill refused it with a grin.

"A man can't drink much when he's laid up thisaway," was his excuse.

Sam's glance settled on the bedpost. "Dona hung your gun handy, didn't she? There ain't much she don't think of. The Old Man says she got all the sense in the family and I must have had my head under a jug when the brains was passed out. She's got cow savvy aplenty, too, and she's a better hand with a green horse than ary bronc stomper we ever had. Well, take 'er easy, mister. Jake's havin' a medicine talk with you when we git back. We liked the way you tied into Dude Rankin. The Window outfit kin use a fightin' hand. So think 'er over while we're gone. So long."

THE bed Bill was lying on was near the window, giving him a clear view of the barn and corrals. Watching, Bill Greer saw Sam and three cowpunchers ride away. Jake Johns sent three men in another direction. Then Dona Santell left the house, headed for the barn. She was dressed in overalls and a denim brush jacket, boots and a light-gray Stetson, worn with the crown flattened California style. Bill Greer's eyes narrowed. When she mounted a good-looking brown cow pony and rode off with Jake Johns, Bill whistled soundlessly, his black brows puckered.

"Yonder," he told himself, "rides the pair that roped that steer. It was the gal that stood guard on the knoll with a Winchester while Jake Johns worked that Cross brand into the Santell Window without usin' a brandin' iron!"

Throughout the middle of the day Bill Greer was content to lie quietly in bed. Now and then the Mexican woman would look in through the doorway at him. Bill would hear the soft flapping of her huaraches on the old tile floor and feign sleep. He reckoned that the woman had been told to keep an eye on him.

The house had been built in a square, Mexican style, around a patio that was filled with fruit trees and flowers. An old fountain played in the center, and birds sang there and fluttered in and out of the water. Oleander bushes grew as high as the low-roofed adobe house. There were roses and geraniums in profusion. The flowers, Bill reckoned, were from Dona's planting. The fruit trees and the olive tree were far older than the girl, planted there when the place was the headquarters ranch of an old Spanish grant.

Bill Greer waited until he saw the Mexican woman, followed by several small, brown-skinned, half-naked youngsters, leave the main house and cross the clearing, headed for the smaller adobe cabins that housed the ranch help. This was their siesta hour. By the same token it was the chance for which Bill patiently had waited.

Painfully, every move he made sending pains stabbing through his back like knives, Bill Greer quit the bed. He pulled on his overalls and buckled on his six-shooter. In his bare feet he began a painful, laborious inspection of the house.

The rooms all had doors opening onto the patio. The room next to

the one occupied by Bill belonged, judging by the litter of boots, catch ropes, chaps, and cowpuncher belongings, to Sam Santell.

Cigarette stubs filled two or three earthenware bowls used as ash trays. There were several rifles, carbines, and a sawed-off shotgun in a gun rack on the wall. Pictures of scantily clothed females on calendars advertising Mexican liquors adorned the walls; a half-filled olla with a gourd dipper hung from the beamed ceiling within easy reach of the bed. An empty tequila bottle with the stub of a candle shoved in its neck stood on the table that was littered with illustrated magazines that went in heavily for pictures of burlesque queens, prizefighters, and jockeys on race horses. Rodeo notices and copies of the livestock weekly were on the table with the rest of the untidy litter. It was plain that Sam Santell let no woman tidy up his room. The bed was without sheets and had not been made.

Bill went through a chest of drawers that were filled with shirts and underwear and socks. He left the room a few minutes later without having found what he was searching for.

THE next room belonged to Jake Johns. It was more orderly. The bed was made. Clothes were hung on wooden pegs in a corner that was partitioned off by a couple of serapes that served as curtains. Johns' town boots were polished and stood in the corner. The floor was swept, the ash tray cleaned, the old-fashioned, marble-topped dresser and washstand were dusted, and the wash bowl and towels clean.

Bill had little hope of finding anything in this room. He was startled when he did make a find in a drawer that held half a dozen clean flannel shirts neatly ironed and folded. Under the shirts his probing fingers found what he had hardly dared hope to find in the big old black walnut chest of drawers that was a product of Spain. It was a panel that slid back, revealing a false bottom in the lowest drawer. Luck had favored him. He had piled the shirts on a chair and his fingertips had pressed and shoved until the thin panel slid back, revealing a compartment beneath that was perhaps four inches deep and half the length of the drawer.

In the compartment he found a pair of handcuffs, one of which had been filed open. The other side was locked. The mechanism was stained and clogged with dried blood that was brown with age now, like rust. There was a metal badge, similarly stained—the badge of a Texas Ranger. With these grisly souvenirs were half a dozen muslin and paper reward dodgers.

Bill Greer examined the handcuffs, his jaw muscles knotted, his eyes hard and cold. He was deducing a story that fitted with the ugly tale he had heard rumored along the border. He put the handcuffs back and examined the badge. Scratched on the back of the badge he made out crude initials put there with the point of a jackknife blade. The initials were D. S. Bill put the badge back where he found it and picked up the reward dodgers. He saw that they must have been ripped away from a wall or post or tree where they had been fastened, for the four corners of each were torn.

These reward notices were alike in one respect. All gave the same identical description of the fugitive. But the name on each one of the dodgers was different. Only one bore the name "Jake Johns."

Bill Greer, absorbed in the examining of the reward dodgers, had heard no sound to warn him that anyone was watching him. Instinct, not his ears, finally gave him the warning.

He tensed without moving. His back was to the door, and somebody was behind him, there in the doorway. He knew it just as well as he knew he was alive. Alive now. But expecting, the next split second, to have a bullet crash through his spine.

Bill Greer's heart seemed to quit beating. Every fiber of his nerves were on edge, taut. He had to force himself to act as he now did. Shift the reward dodgers to his left hand. Pretend to be absorbed in the black lettering on them. Replace them in the secret compartment.

Then, oblivious to the savage pains that tore his injured back, he whirled swiftly, his gun in his hand. The hammer thumbed back. But he did not pull the trigger.

IN the doorway stood the Mexican woman, Rosita. Her fat, moon face was expressionless. Her opaque black eyes masked her emotions. Stolid, expressionless as a statue carved of brown mahogany, the woman stood there without moving.

She was more Indian now than Mexican. Her Mayan ancestry predominated, wiping out whatever strain of broncho Mexican was in her blood. There was no fear of the white man's cocked gun, no emotion of any sort changed her expression, the opaque blackness of her eyes. She had taken off her huarache sandals and was in her bare feet. That was why her coming had been without sound.

"I put back." Rosita's tone was flat, low-pitched. "There is somebody come. You get back to that room, in bed."

She came into the room with two quick, soundless steps, moving surprisingly fast for a woman of her vast bulk. Bill Greer glanced out the window. He saw Dona Santell ride up to the barn and swing to the ground.

"The señorita!" grunted Rosita. "Go! Pronto!"

She took the reward dodgers from his hand. She was replacing them, sliding the secret panel of the false-bottomed drawer shut, putting the pile of flannel shirts back in the drawer as Bill Greer quit the room, shoving his gun back in its holster. He was hardly back in bed before Dona Santell came into his room.

Bill, his face beaded with cold sweat from the pains that were still knifing his back from his recent activities, managed a faint grin.

"I tried to move around some," he said, "but I reckon you was plenty right when you said I had to ride this bed awhile. You come back early."

"Yes." There was no warmth in the girl's tone. Her eyes studied him unwinkingly. "Yes, I got back early."

She was standing near the head of the bed. Still watching him, she lifted his gun belt and six-shooter from the bedpost with a quick, deft movement.

"I'll take care of your gun for a while," she said bluntly.

"That's all right with me, ma'am." Bill Greer met her cold stare with level gaze. He figured that Rosita had told her about finding him in Jake Johns' room. He waited for the girl's next move. Ready, if necessary, to get his gun back even if he had to get rough about it. Her next words stunned him like a blow between the eyes.

"So it was you that killed that steer and cut out the brand!"

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT'S YOUR GAME?"

FOR the moment Bill Greer was too surprised to say anything. Dona Santell came close to the bed and looked down at him.

"What's your game, mister?" Her voice was almost casual. "Have you got a law badge hid out somewhere?"

Bill Greer shook his head. "No law badge. And the game I'm playing is one that concerns just me and a friend of mine. The friend is dead. I've picked up the hand he dropped when he was murdered."

"You killed that steer and cut the brand out," the girl said flatly. "And you took my brother's part against Dude Rankin. Why? I've got a right to know that much."

"I might have killed that steer and cut out the brand to keep Ken Cross and Dude Rankin from getting evidence they needed to jail Jake Johns and Sam Santell," Bill Greer suggested.

"Or you might be using that brand to get a tail hold here at the Window outfit?" guessed the girl. "Blackmail stuff."

"I wanted a job with your Window outfit," admitted Bill, grinning. "My reason is a good un. You found that brand?"

The girl nodded shortly. "Your tracks took me to the saguaro. I got the brand."

"Then cache it where nobody kin find it. That hunk of steer hide with a brand worked from scabbing the brand with a rock and a smear of piñon pitch might save yore dad from hangin'. Don't ask me how or why. I'd hate to lie to the purtiest girl I ever met."

"You work fast, don't you, cowboy? That fight you picked with Dude Rankin was just a trick to set you right here. How do I know that you're not working with Dude to smash the Window outfit? Dude framed my dad into jail. He tried to get Sam and Jake Johns on a cattle-rustling charge. He's been trying to make me marry him for a long time," the girl said. "How . . . how do I know you didn't double-cross Dude because you got a look at me and decided to make a play for me?"

"Just remember," Bill Greer answered, "that when I tackled Dude Rankin I'd never had a look at you. I was a long ways off when I watched you and Jake Johns rope that steer. I thought you was a boy. You're guessin' wrong. That steer was on your Window range—the only Cross steer I've sighted in a week on your range. That trick of working a brand with piñon pitch to make a scabby brand is one that comes from the New Mexico country. I was in a hurry or I'd never have left sign that you could trail. Were you alone or was Jake Johns with you when you located that brand I cached in the Saguaro?"

"I was alone," admitted Dona Santell.

"Have you told anybody about it?"

"No."

"Supposin' I asked you to trust me?"

"I'll trust you this far, mister. I'll give you back your gun. But not your cartridge belt. Your gun will be empty. I want it to look like I trust you. If you're on the level, all right. If you're playing some kind of a snake game, you'll get killed. An empty gun is worse than no gun at all."

Bill nodded. "Thanks. You're giving me a man's chance. Jake Johns don't trust me too far. Sam is leery. They'll figure I have a loaded gun. They'll shoot quick if they think I'm wrong. Is that it?"

"You're getting the drift, cowboy." Dona ejected the cartridges from Bill's gun and tossed it on his bed.

"And if I'm killed," continued Bill Greer, handling the empty gun, "there'll be powder marks in the barrel and empty shells in the cylinder. Jake Johns or Sam will claim self-defense. That'll be Zeke Santell's plea when he comes up for trial, won't it?"

"Zeke Santell never shot that Texas Ranger," Dona said hotly. "He'll prove an alibi."

THE district attorney will punch that alibi so full of holes it will look like a sieve. His two alibi witnesses are Sam, his son, and Jake Johns, his ramrod. Sam was drunk the night that Texas Ranger Dewey Smith was killed; his testimony will be tossed out because he was drunk. Jake Johns can't testify because he's a fugitive and has given perjured testimony at other trials."

"What about my testimony?" Dona Santell's face was colorless now.

"Worthless," declared Bill. "Zeke Santell hopes to prove he was in bed here at the Window Ranch the night Ranger Dewey Smith was murdered, which he was. But Sam wasn't. Neither was Jake Johns. Neither were you because you had left the ranch after dark to meet Ranger Dewey Smith at the saguaro where you found that cached brand."

"For a common cowhand," said Dona, her voice a low whisper, "you know too much. Zeke Santell is innocent. If it comes to a show-down I'll let you get killed before I see my dad hung for a crime he didn't commit."

"And I wouldn't blame you, ma'am. I'm askin' you to trust me. How long before I kin ride a horse? Providin', of course, that you don't tell Sam or Jake Johns to murder me?"

"You'll be able to ride in two or three days. That liniment and salve and massages I'm giving you will fix you up."

"Then trust me for that long. Keep that brand and don't show it to anybody. That's going to save Zeke Santell's life if you'll string your bets with me."

"What do you mean?" Dona whispered huskily.

"You think a lot of Jake Johns, I reckon?"

"He's done us some mighty big favors. On the other hand he's had a bad, ornery, tough influence on Sam. Rosita has tried twice to knife him in the back."

"Jake Johns hated Dewey Smith, didn't he?" questioned Bill Greer.

"Yes." Dona's face flushed. "Dewey paid a lot of attention to me. Jake Johns was terribly jealous. Besides, he was afraid of Dewey because of something that happened years ago in Texas. Jake's worst trouble is jealousy. That's

why he hates Dude Rankin now. Jake's done a lot for us. He saved Sam's life once, and when dad was broke, Jake Johns loaned him money."

"You've halfway promised to marry Jake Johns haven't you?" asked Bill Greer. "I heard that along with most of what you've told me."

"For all his tough and ornery ways," said the girl. "Jake worships the ground I walk on. I could do a lot worse."

"And a lot better," grinned Bill Greer. "Jake Johns has wore out jails on both sides of the border. He's as treacherous as a snake. He's got young Sam travelin' a crooked trail."

"And you think he has me helping him change Cross brands into the Window iron?" added Dona.

"It looked that way from the Window Rock where I squatted on my hunkers and watched the show."

"Then you do have a law badge hidden out?" Her tone was heavy with contempt, a little sharp with fear and dread.

"No law badge, lady," denied Bill. "I'd like a look at that brand. I didn't git a chance to examine it close."

"You don't get your hands on it now or ever. Maybe I'll have Jake Johns take care of you."

"Me with an empty gun? A cripple with an empty gun is just the kind of meat Jake Johns likes. Hop to it, lady. And when you marry him—"

"Roll over on your stomach," Dona interrupted. "If you're going to ride away from here in two days, I've got to rub a pint or quart of liniment into that hide of yours. I'm a fool to trust you, but I'm giving you a chance to get off the Window range."

Bill Greer grinned his thanks and rolled over on his stomach. Dona's small, strong hands rubbed the liniment and salve into the sore, bruised muscles of his back. She had just finished when the door opened and Jake Johns stood there, his bleak, pale blue-gray eyes staring at the two of them.

"I want to have a powwow with this hombre, Dona," he said flatly. "You better leave the room."

CHAPTER V

JOHNS LAYS DOWN THE CARDS

WHEN the girl had left the room Jake Johns stood beside the bed, his pale eyes studying Bill.

"Now, mister," said the Window ramrod, "just where and when and how did our trails cross before. I'll know if you lie to me. And if you do lie, it'll be the last time you try it. Talk turkey!"

"Your name was Jim Turlock, and they called you the Towheaded Kid," began Bill Greer. "You worked for the Circle outfit in New Mexico and you overmatched yourself one night in the rough hills at San Luis Pass. You tried to kill six Mexicans that caught you with some cattle you had slipped out of Chihuahua. Because your hide was white, even if your heart had a lot of black in it, I backed your play. It was moonlight and I rode a line-backed dun horse. You kin take your hand off your gun, mister—unless you want to murder a man that helped you in a tight."

"If you're that man," said Jake Johns, his pale eyes bleak, dangerous, "then you know that—"

"That you and Dude Rankin was pardners," Bill broke in. "That you was handlin' wet cattle. And that while you put up a bush-whackin' fight, Dude Rankin was

hazin' those cattle into the mountains. If you feel like takin' it up now because I'm on my back, and because I kin read your brand and Dude Rankin's brand, have at it. My gun is in my hand and I'll shoot the belly off you before you kin pull that gun of yours. Is that talkin' cold turkey, mister?"

"You got me over a barrel, Greer. I can't kill a man in cold blood when that man saved my life once. You might be able to shoot my belly off. On the other hand, you might be too slow. The best deal I kin give you is this: Git off this ranch and quit the Window range. Because if Dude Rankin ever found out what you just told me, he'd kill you. You sided me in a tight once. I'm doin' the best I know how to return the favor. I'm playin' for big stakes here. Don't horn in. You got that straight?"

"I got it straight, Jake Johns. You and Dude don't hit it off together any more, do you?"

"We split the blankets when he pulled out on me at San Luis Pass. I hate him as bad as he hates me."

"But because you're tarred with the same brush," Bill Greer added, "neither of you kin squeal on the other feller. Dude Rankin's name was somethin' else in New Mexico, and in Texas. He wears a law badge now and that gives him the bulge on you. Ken Cross got him that badge, I reckon.

"When the sign is right, Dude will kill Ken Cross. You two gents have Zeke Santell in jail. You got Sam Santell loco drunk most of the time. It won't be long now till the three of 'em are out of the way. Then you and Dude Rankin will have the Cross and the Window outfits. But which of you will be claimin' Dona Santell?"

"I will, mister," Jake Johns said flatly. "And I'm readin' your cards right now. You're here to cut yourself in on the fat meat. In that case, you better string along with Jake Johns. Is that your game?"

THAT would beat quittin' the country, wouldn't it?" Bill Greer's voice was toneless, his eyes hard, and the grin on his face had no humor in it.

"You're too wise to live long, Greer, but I'm cuttin' you in. You take the proper care of Dude Rankin and you're cut in on the fat meat. But you make ary pass at Dona Santell and you won't live long. Zeke's goin' to hang when I take the witness stand. Sam Santell will get his. After Dude takes care of Ken Cross, your work is cut out for you. You kin dance at my weddin'."

"Dance at your weddin', Jake, or spit on your grave. Plans kin go wrong, no matter how well you lay 'em. Here comes Rosita with my supper. Clear out."

The fat Mexican-Mayan woman came in with a laden tray. When Jake Johns had left the room, she spoke to Bill in a low monotone.

"He will kill you, señor. Maybe tonight."

Bill showed her his empty gun. "Get me cartridges. Have my horse saddled and hid. Talk to nobody. I aim to ride to Mesa Grande to get your *patron*, the Señor Zeke Santell, out of jail."

He lay back on his pillows. While the woman set his tray on the table he continued to talk to her in Mexican.

"Jake Johns wants to marry the señorita," he told her.

"I will kill him before that happens, señor," Rosita declared, her black eyes flaring. "He is a wicked

man. He has the heart of a bad animal."

"Perhaps I am no better than Jake Johns."

"You are an enemy of that man. For me that is enough. You will promise to kill him if I get for you the bullets and the horse?"

"If he harms the señorita, I will kill him, yes. But first I want to get Zeke Santell out of jail. Guard the señorita while I am gone, Rosita. It will be midnight before I can get away from here without being seen. I have to get into Jake Johns' room again."

"To get what you found in that drawer?"

"Yes. You know about that drawer, Rosita?"

"I know. I get for you everything that is in there. That Jake Johns makes a ride somewhere tonight with the Señor Sam. Perhaps the señorita rides also with them. *Quién sabe?* Already the young Señor Sam is drunk. They ride, perhaps, to the Cross ranch."

"The señorita will not go with them. When Jake Johns and Sam ride away, get those things from the secret drawer. Have my horse ready. But first I need cartridges for my gun."

Rosita reached in a pocket of her dress. She took out a handful of .45 cartridges and shoved them under Bill's pillows.

"The señorita herself gave them to me to return to you," she explained. "She made me promise not to tell you."

"She did?" Bill grinned as he loaded his gun.

"She wants you to go tonight because she is afraid they will kill you. It is the Señorita Dona who will be waiting, perhaps, with your horse. But I was not to tell you that."

"Then she does trust me and believe in me."

"She listened outside the door after she left the room, señor," said Rosita. "She thinks you are a Tejano Ranger like the Señor Dewey Smith."

"And she don't want me murdered like they murdered Dewey Smith. Who killed the Tejano Ranger, Rosita?"

Rosita shrugged her fat shoulders. "*Quién sabe, señor.* His dead body was found between here and Mesa Grande. His left hand had been shot off at the wrist. He had been killed with his own gun. I can tell you no more than that."

Bill Greer nodded. "That's enough for the time being. Let me know when Jake Johns and Sam Santell have gone."

THE woman nodded and left the room. From outside Bill heard voices. He caught some of the words.

Sam Santell's voice, thick with tequila, ugly, harsh, threatening.

"I don't trust him, Sis. He's a Ranger and he's here to learn things that—"

"He's crippled." Dona's voice was sharp. "He's not going to be murdered. Haven't you done enough harm, you and Jake? You won't have dad to cover your tracks this time. Get on your horses and do whatever it is that you and Jake have to do tonight. You're not getting into Bill Greer's room. Time enough when he's able to stand on his feet and defend himself. You're drunk, Sam. You're loco drunk. Don't show up here till you're sober. Jake, if you give Sam another bottle, I'll tell everything I know about how Dewey Smith was murdered."

"And hang your own brother,

Dona?" There was a threat in Jake Johns' voice.

"You've never threatened me before, Jake. Don't try it now. You'd both better clear out."

"Come on, Sam. Your sister's on the prod tonight."

Bill Greer heard them ride away. Soon Rosita slipped back into the room with a bulky little muslin sack. Bill opened it. The bloodstained handcuffs and badge and the reward dodgers were in it.

"You go now." Her voice was low-toned.

Bill already had his overalls and boots on. The Mexican-Mayan woman handed him his cartridge belt. The pain across his back was a lot better. He could move without suffering too much.

CHAPTER VI

NIGHT RIDE

BILL found his saddled horse behind the barn. Dona Santell was waiting in the shadows out of the moonlight.

"You'll not come back, ever, will you?" she said, her voice pleading.

"Jake Johns," Bill told her, not answering her question, "is aiming to hang your father. He hopes to get Sam killed tonight. I'm riding to Mesa Grande to get your dad out of jail, Dona. I'm not running away from anything. Saddle your horse and come along. Fetch that worked brand. We may need it to save Zeke Santell from hangin'. I'm no law officer. But Dewey Smith was my pardner.

"I know that your father didn't kill Dewey Smith. He's covering for Sam because he thinks Sam did the killing. Sam was handcuffed to Dewey Smith when Dewey was shot from the brush. The man who did that bushwhacking took Dewey's gun and emptied it at close range into his dead body, leaving plenty of powder burns on Dewey's clothes. Then he shot Dewey's hand off at the wrist to get it free of the handcuffs, because Dewey had thrown away the key when he handcuffed himself to Sam and started for town.

"That left Sam with the bloody handcuffs hanging to his wrist. Sam came back to the ranch with Jake Johns. Jake filed off the handcuffs and kept 'em along with Dewey Smith's Ranger badge. That's how I have it figured out."

Dona's face wore a look of amazed incredulity.

"It couldn't have been Jake Johns!" She gripped Bill's arm, her voice a tense whisper. "He was with me when Dewey Smith was killed. I'd been meeting Dewey near that saguaro where you hid the brand. I was riding to meet him there that night. It wasn't a lovers' tryst. Dewey had sent word that he had something important to tell me, something about Sam rustling. Jake followed me and made me come back with him to the ranch. So it couldn't have been Jake Johns."

"Then who killed Dewey and who filed the handcuffs off Sam's wrists?" demanded Bill Greer.

"Sam didn't see who did it. It happened in the dark. The man hit Sam over the head with a gun. Sam was drunk that night. He remembers that Dewey took away his gun and that they headed for Mesa Grande handcuffed together. There were shots from the brush as they rode along handcuffed together. Either Sam was knocked out when he fell off his horse or the killer hit him over the head. He showed up at the ranch with his scalp all cut and a big lump on his head. He wasn't wearing handcuffs.

"He didn't know Dewey Smith had been killed till Dude Rankin and Ken Cross showed up at the ranch. Father was here. He told Dude that if he was arresting anybody, to take him. Jake told me that Sam and my dad had been doing some night riding after Cross cattle that night. He told me to keep my mouth shut and he'd alibi dad clear."

Bill Greer scowled thoughtfully. "How many people," he asked, "know about that false bottom in one of the drawers of that old chest of drawers where Jake Johns keeps his shirts?"

"False bottom in that chest of drawers?" Dona said, surprised. "I never knew there was such a thing."

"Where did that chest of drawers come from?"

"It's been here since I was a baby. Most of the furniture was here when dad got the ranch."

"I wondered why a man as smart as Jake Johns would be saving evidence that would send him to the pen. Who had the ranch before your dad got it?"

"The Cross outfit. Ken and his father, Marvin Cross. But—"

"The Cross outfit, you say." Bill thought things were beginning to add up. "Let's git goin'. We're overdue right now at that Mesa Grande jail. Where's yore dad's saddle and the best horse you got. He'll need it tonight."

THERE was a round white moon shining down on Bill and Dona Santell as they left the ranch. Bill caught a glimpse of Rosita, stolidly watching them from the doorway of her adobe house. He smiled grimly as he led the horse that carried Zeke Santell's saddle.

As they rode through the night, Bill asked Dona many questions. Questions that concerned the Cross family and her own. Questions about Dewey Smith, Dude Rankin, Jake Johns.

"Not that I'm just plain curious, Dona," he told her when she seemed reluctant to talk. "I have good reasons for askin'. Reasons that will clear Zeke Santell and Sam of a lot of ugly things men are sayin' about 'em. Like brand workin'. Dude Rankin is the only man in these parts that knows how to work a brand with piñon pitch. That clears Zeke Santell of rustlin'."

"Zeke Santell," Dona said earnestly, "is no rustler. Please believe that. And the brand I'm carrying now in my chaps pocket had been worked before Jake and I roped that steer. We roped the steer to examine the brand. Dude claimed that Dewey caught dad working a brand without a hot iron, and that dad killed him."

"The steer was planted on your range. Who sighted it first?" asked Bill.

"I did," the girl answered. "I saw that scabby brand. Told Jake to rope the steer and see how the brand was worked. The steer still

had the Cross earmarks and it looked like somebody had planted the critter on the Window range. I meant to come back tomorrow and pick it up to hold it as evidence. That brand had been worked since my dad was jailed. I thought perhaps Sam—"

"That Sam might have been trying his luck at rustlin'," nodded Bill. "Well, he didn't. The brand clears Zeke of rustling and murder. Concerning yore brother—"

"Sam's not my blood brother," Dona interrupted. "He's adopted. A range waif dad picked up."

They had neared the little cow town of Mesa Grande. There was only a single light showing. It came from the saloon called the Cantina Grande.

"We'll give that place a wide berth," Bill told Dona. He counted four saddled horses at the long hitch rack in front of the saloon. They swung around it and headed for the little adobe jail at the edge of town.

"You stay back here in the brush, Dona," Bill ordered. "That jail looks as easy as a tomato can to open. I'll need your ketch rope."

Bill rode up to the barred window and called softly through the window.

"You in there, Zeke?"

"Hell, yes," Zeke Santell growled. "Where'd you think I was? In church? That you, Jake?"

"Nope. Tie these two ropes to the bar you figure will come loose the easiest. I got your horse and gun out here. You're comin' out to kill a couple of snakes. Who I am don't matter. Dona's with me."

Zeke Santell fastened the two ropes to one of the bars. Bill took a couple of turns around his saddlehorn, dallying both ropes. His big black horse lunged, and the bar came free of the adobe. Five minutes later the second bar was jerked loose and Zeke Santell, a small, leathery-faced gray-haired man crawled through.

Bill handed him a cartridge belt and six-shooter he had taken from Dona.

"There's four men at the Cantina," he told Zeke. "One of 'em is Sam. Sam might be right or he might be as ornery as the others. They're Dude Rankin, Ken Cross, and Jake Johns. Those three snakes need killin'. Sam might side 'em if he's wrong. If he's right, he'll side you and me. Let's git goin'."

"Who in hell are you, mister? What's your game?" demanded Zeke Santell, putting on the gun belt.

"Dewey Smith was my pardner," Bill Greer explained swiftly. "Dude Rankin and Ken Cross killed him one night and they fixed it so the blame was laid on you. Jake Johns has an alibi, but it ain't savin' his hide tonight. If you got ary love for your daughter Dona, you'll side me now."

"How do I know you ain't trappin' me?"

"Dona's yonder in the brush. Ask her. I've got evidence tied on my saddle that will convict Jake Johns, regardless. The evidence was planted by Ken Cross' mother in Jake's room."

"Ken Cross ain't got a mother, stranger."

"Rosita is Ken Cross' real mother. She wants Dude Rankin and Jake Johns killed off so Ken will have a chance to marry Dona."

"Now that you mention it, mister, Rosita and Ken Cross might be son and mother. Ken was born on the place. Marvin Cross claimed Ken like I claimed Sam. Sam was

a wind-bellied orphan. He turned out bad. Ken Cross wasn't no better. When Dude Rankin and Jake Johns got hold of 'em they got more ornery than ever."

"Dude Rankin," continued Bill Greer, "and Jake Johns was pardners. They're both after the two outfits. Rosita is helpin' Ken double-cross Jake Johns. It was Dona that split Dude and Jake. She's safe, yonder in the brush. Let's leave her there and clean out that snake nest. She might git chicken-hearted and talk us out of it if she knowed."

"We're wastin' time, mister. Yonder's the cantina." Zeke Santell's voice was brittle.

THEY rode their horses up to the hitch rack and swung to the ground. Bill Greer was ahead of Zeke Santell as he stepped through the door.

"I got Dewey Smith's badge in my pocket!" called Bill Greer as they entered the almost empty cantina. "Zeke Santell's at my back. Git out that back door, Sam. You other three snakes, fill your hands!"

Sam caught a glimpse of Zeke. His face went white as chalk.

"Damn you, Jake, this is your work!" Sam Santell's voice was a harsh scream as he jerked his gun and fired at Jake Johns. But Johns was faster. Sam went down in a limp heap. Zeke's first bullet dropped Jake Johns in his tracks.

Ken Cross and Dude Rankin were both shooting at Bill Greer, whose gun was spewing flame with the rapidity of an automatic.

"Dewey Smith was my pardner!" he repeated. Through a red smear he saw Dude Rankin and Ken Cross go down, their guns spitting fire, their shots going wild.

It was all over in split seconds. Clouds of powder smoke filled the place. The bartender was lying prone behind his bar, scared out of his wits. The crashing echoes of gunfire were deafening.

Zeke Santell picked Bill Greer off the floor and laid him on a dilapidated pool table.

"Whoever you are," said the owner of the Window outfit, "you'll shore do to take along.

"Fetch a doctor," he called to the saloonman. "This feller's got to live."

Bill Greer's eyes were open when Dona Santell, alarmed by the shooting, came in. He tried to motion her back outside, but she wouldn't go. The saloonman had fetched the doctor. Zeke Santell, reloading his gun, motioned toward Bill.

"Patch him up, doc. Do a good job or I'll send you to hell along with them four dead uns on the floor. Dona, who is this fightin' son of a gun, anyhow?"

"His name is Bill Greer," said Dona. "He told me back along the trail that he was going to marry me. Will he live, doctor?"

"A bullet through his cheek won't kill a cowpuncher," said the doctor briskly. "Another through his leg might keep him from riding for a few weeks, if the bone's broke."

"We'll have to let Rosita go back to Mexico, dad," Dona Santell said shakily, "if Bill keeps that threat or promise or whatever it was, back on the trail. I'll wait at the doctor's house, dad. I don't want to act like a female sissy, but I'm likely to pass out if I stay in here."

Zeke Santell, who had come out of the fight without a scratch, took his daughter outside. Then he came back. The doctor had Bill's face and leg bandaged. Zeke picked up the dead body of Sam and carried it

into a back room. He covered it with a canvas tarp.

DUDE and Ken Cross killed Dewey," explained Bill. "I have letters that Dewey wrote before they got him. Dude and Jake Johns killed Dewey's dad and mine down on the Texas border ten years ago. My dad and Dewey's dad were both Rangers. Dewey picked up the cold trail a few months ago. Sam's arrest didn't mean much. He was just a tool they used to make trouble between your outfit and the Cross spread. I'm glad I didn't have to shoot Sam. On account of the—"

"Dona," nodded Zeke Santell. "I savvy. And now I think I'll have a drink before Dona takes a notion to come back. She's hell agin' the stuff. Here's howdy, mister. Doc, git Bill Greer moved outta here. Dona will want to practice her nursin' on him, I reckon."

"Just a minute," said Bill. "You got to understand about my pardner Dewey. When he taken the trail, hopin' to pick up the sign of Dude Rankin and Jake Johns, he kept writin' to me. Before ever I come on the Window range I had a line on things. Dewey wrote me, sayin' that he was in a tight and to come a-runnin'. That he was liable to git killed any time. He said he was goin' to have to arrest Sam Santell to git him outta the way because Sam was just a tool for Dude Rankin and Jake Johns.

"He wrote in his letter that in case he got killed before I reached here to see what I could learn about a Mexican woman called Rosita who worked at the Window Ranch. He said he'd begun to suspect that Rosita was just as dangerous as any man. And while it sounded like a pipe dream, he suspected Rosita was some close kin to Ken Cross. Dewey's letter sounded like he'd bit off more than he could swallow. He had a strong notion he would git killed before I got here. In which case I was to play his hand out."

"Which," Zeke Santell finished, taking another furtive pull at the bottle, "you shore did, mister. You and Dona will be gittin' married, she tells me. You'll not be takin' her away? She's all I got. Unless you got somethin' better somewheres, the Window outfit needs you almighty bad. I'd like to keep you and Dona here. You can be the man to take over the Cross outfit. Pool it with the Window and we'll have us a spread that will be somethin'."

"I got nothing to go back to New Mexico for," Bill Greer told him, "even if I could talk Dona into leavin' her home range, which I doubt. It's a deal."

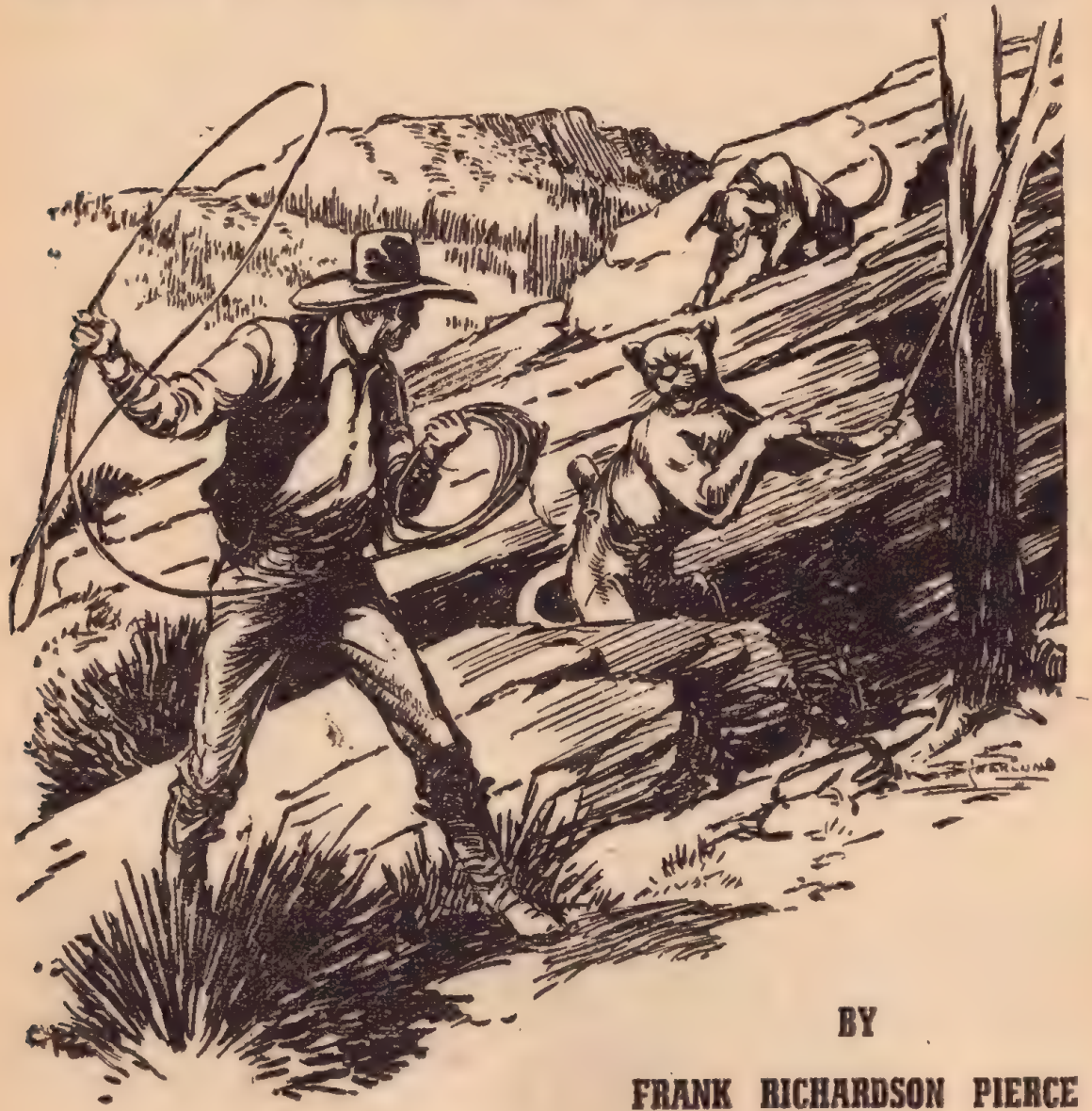
Zeke Santell passed him the bottle. Bill took a swallow and handed it back just as Dona came through the doorway.

"Doctor," Dona said, pretending to scowl at the bottle that Zeke tried in vain to hide, "I think we'd better get Bill out of here before he and Zeke Santell get going too strong. Dad, if you and Bill want to drink to our happiness, get the job done. And if it will make you feel any easier, I'll turn my back. Drink hearty. Then I'm taking full personal charge of Bill. It's time he had somebody to look after him and keep him out of trouble."

Zeke Santell grinned and handed Bill the bottle. "Take a snort. I've seen that look in her eye before. She'll saw your horns off and make you like it. Drink hearty, son!"

THE END.

BOUNTY HUNTER'S BOOMERANG



BY

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

LAFE DRURY stood apart from the crowd and listened as things that had been a part of his life from the day he was born were sold off. Each time the auctioneer shouted, "Sold!" Lafe made a mental note of the buyer. Some of these days, when he had made enough money, he would buy back most of this furniture. He promised himself he would buy the old homestead, too.

A stranger named Ed Beach had bought the six hundred and forty acres surrounding the old Drury house. Beach had also bought the livestock, and machinery, bought it cheap, too, because he had let it be known if the neighbors bid against him and ran up the price, he might turn out to be a bad neighbor. And Beach, red-faced, beefy and overbearing, looked as if he could make himself mighty unpleasant.

"That's all there's left," the auc-

tioneer said at last, "except the boy, Lafe, and the family dog, Growler. I can't sell the boy." He waited for the laugh he knew would come. It came, and put the tired bidders in a better humor. "How much am I bid for the dog? He's old, but he's a good cat dog. Some of you folks may not know it, but the late Jed Drury was a cat man. That is, he hunted down cougars, bobcats and such. Growler, here, was great on treein' a cougar when he was young. He's a good dog, even yet."

Lafe Drury spoke for the first time. "Growler's mine," he said.

"The papers in connection with the property don't show it," the auctioneer declared. "The bill o' sale was made out to Jed Drury. It's my duty to get all I can for the creditors. How much am I bid for the best cat dog these parts have ever known?"

Lafe reached into his pocket. He knew the exact amount of money it contained. Nevertheless, he counted it again. "I bid fifty-five cents for Growler," he said.

"I bid a dollar," shouted Ed Beach. "Might as well have another cat dog, if he's a good one."

"I'll bid two dollars, if you'll take my note?" Lafe told the auctioneer. "I can pay it off soon as I find a job."

"Five," Beach snapped.

"We can't take notes," the auctioneer said. A moment later he knocked down Growler to Beach. When the total amount realized from the sale was estimated, it was a little less than the huge debt incurred by Lafe's parents during their last illness.

Lafe remained apart, watching the crowd surge into the old home, grab up the things they had bought and hurry away with them. It made him think of wolves tearing a fine, old bull elk apart.

When the last purchaser had gone, Lafe walked over to Beach. "How much do you want for Growler?" he asked. "I'll take him offn your hands as soon as I can."

"If he's as good a cat dog as they claim, he's worth fifty dollars to any cat man," Beach answered. "If he ain't, he's worth his weight as coyote bait."

"I'll take him at fifty dollars, Mr. Beach, when I get the fifty dollars," Lafe offered.

"Are you a cat man?" Beach asked sharply.

"No," Lafe answered, "it's just that Growler is my dog."

LAFE DRURY couldn't explain to Beach, nor to anyone else, that he was afraid of cats. He was even afraid of house cats, and he hated himself for it, and bitterly called himself a coward. And but for this fear, his own future would have been bright. He could have taken up where his father had left off and continued as a cat man.

The Drury homestead was ideally located for cat hunters. There were plenty of deer on the game reserve a mile south of their boundary line. To the north there lay hundreds of square miles of gorges, deep canyons and high mountains. Snow and lack of good hunting drove the cats into the main canyon, which broke through a low range two miles from the Drury's north boundary.

Cats had kept the Drury family in food while Jed was gradually developing his homestead and buying acres around it. Cats gave them comforts and even luxuries, long after the homestead was supporting them. But for his stark fear of cats, Lafe could have started from scratch, as his father had once done, and made a good living.

During his father's sickness, sev-

eral orders had come in for cats. They would continue to come, Lafe knew. Even if the big world beyond the homestead heard of Jed Drury's death, it would soon forget, and when zoo keepers and showmen wanted to know where they could get a cat, someone would be sure to say, "Write a letter to Jed Drury at Little Coulee, and he'll fix you up. If he can't trap one, he'll go into a den after him."

And that was just what Lafe's father had done countless times. Lafe had watched him. He, himself, had stood nearby, a shotgun loaded with buckshot in his hands, while his body shook with fear—the fear he hated so intensely.

A cat man couldn't endure a fear of cats in his son, and Jed had more than once thrashed his son within an inch of his life. When he found whipping didn't overcome the boy's fear, he gave up. He was puzzled, because Lafe had shown courage in every other respect.

But Lafe's mother had an idea about the cause of her son's fear of cats. "Jed," she said, "do you mind the time that cougar pelt you had hangin' on the wall fell on Lafe's crib? It liked to smother the little fellow before we saw what'd happened. It scared him almost to death. Maybe that had somethin' to do with the way he feels now."

And Lafe's mother was dead right, even though she didn't know that such incidents create deep fears in humans that often remain after the incident itself is forgotten.

And now Beach was asking Lafe Drury if he was a cat man. "No," Lafe answered, and let it go at that.

"How old are you?" Beach asked.

"Eighteen," Lafe answered.

"Big and strong, too," Beach said. He looked at Lafe as if he were sizing up a horse he had some thought of buying. "Somebody's done hard work on this place. Everything's been kept up. Did you do it?"

"Yes. After the folks went to the hospital, I had to do it all," Lafe explained.

"Got a job?"

"No. I expect to get one, though. And buy Growler back. You said fifty dollars was the price?"

"Yeah, fifty dollars," Beach said. "I can't pay much," he continued, getting back to what was on his mind, "but I'll need somebody to keep things goin' a while, somebody who knows the stock, and all that. Tell you what, I'll give you twenty dollars a month and keep until you can line up somethin' better."

"Forty and found is more like it," Lafe argued.

"Yeah, but times are hard and this is the slack season," Beach argued grudgingly. "And bein' at your old home, with things you're used to, like the dog, is worth somethin'."

"Make it twenty-five and give me the right to quit any time, and it's a deal," Lafe said. "And I work from sun to sun, but no longer."

It was more than a deal. It was a bargain, and Beach knew it. But he always made it a practice to gain a concession. "You can quit any time and I can fire you without notice," he stipulated.

"That's all right with me," said Lafe.

A WEEK later Beach moved in his household goods, an overworked wife, five young children and seven dogs. Lafe offered to give up his old room and sleep in the barn so the family would have more room. His real reason for moving out was to escape Beach's grumbling, his wife's complaining and the children's constant crying.

From the first, Beach let Lafe

carry the burden of work about the place. The man rode constantly, looking for cat signs. He wanted to try out his young dogs.

"You'd better not stack those dogs up against some of the old cats that drift down this time of the year," Lafe warned him. "You're liable to lose 'em. The cats will fight sometimes, and unless the dogs are smart they'll be killed."

"Listen, Lafe," Beach snapped, "I was huntin' cats before you was borned. I know all kinds of tricks. Do you remember old Three Toes, the cattle killer? The cat that lost a couple of toes in a trap he'd got out of?"

"Yeah, I remember him. There was quite a lot of talk. Folks were afraid he'd turn into a man killer," Lafe said.

"Well, I got him! How? A lot of folks would like to know," Beach boasted. "I ain't tellin'. His eyes narrowed wisely. "I got ways—ways that work."

Lafe didn't ask what they were, because he knew Beach wanted the satisfaction of refusing the information. No better cat man lived than Jed Drury had been. He knew all of the tricks, and he, in turn, had passed them on to Lafe, who probably would never use them.

A month later a cattleman dropped in, passed the time of day with Beach, then rode into the fields where Lafe was working. Beach, always inquisitive, followed him out.

"Somethin' wrong?" he asked.

"Nope," the cattleman answered, "just thought I'd tell Lafe, here, that Old Rustler is back."

"Old Rustler?"

"Yeah. Bein' a stranger in these parts," the cattleman explained, "chances are you never heard of him. Cattleman's Association's got three hundred on his head, dead or alive. And there's zoos that'll give a heap more than that. But I reckon nobody's goin' to take a chance on catchin' Old Rustler alive."

"Three hundred," Beach said softly. "Then there would be the regular bounty of twenty-five dollars. And his pelt will be worth somethin' besides. You can tell the Cattleman's Association treasurer to get out his check book and dip his pen in the ink."

"I'm afraid the ink might dry on the pen," the cattleman drawled. "Just thought I'd tell Lafe, here. His dad always wanted a run-in with Old Rustler, but never had the chance. An' if you're smart, Beach, you'll watch out for your dogs. Old Rustler ain't afraid of 'em. No, he don't wait for 'em to corner him. He doubles back and jumps them that are bringin' up the rear. Hits 'em a lick with his paw and busts their back, or gives 'em a sideswipe."

"Bad, eh?" Beach observed. "But a good cat man can get him."

"Yeah," the cattleman agreed dryly, "a good cat man can get him."

BEACH, with his dogs, left the ranch several days later, and took a big swing up the canyon. When he returned, he looked serious.

"Old Rustler got one of my dogs," he told Lafe. "He's the biggest cat I ever saw."

"You saw him?" Lafe asked curiously.

"No. I didn't exactly see him," Beach admitted. "Just saw his tracks. He'd doubled back, like that cattleman said, and killed the last dog. I'd judge he must be damned near ten feet long and weigh two hundred and eighty pounds."

"That's a lot of cougar," Lafe admitted. "I guess you've got Old Rustler on your hands, sure enough."

A few days later Beach left a calf tied to a tree and spread traps about the spot. He went back the next morning and the calf was still there. The cougar had left footprints, but he hadn't come near a trap. His trail led straight to the nearest bunch of cattle and Beach found he'd pulled down a yearling.

Beach tried several different schemes to lure the big cat within reach of his traps, but none of them worked. Lafe wanted to ask Beach when he was going to try his sure-fire trick of bagging Old Rustler, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Beach trained his six remaining dogs on younger cougars, using Growler as a teacher some of the time. But Growler was too old to keep up a swift pace, and Beach was impatient with him. He hadn't learned, what Jed had told Lafe, that patience in trapping a wary cat is more important than speed.

Early one morning, when tracking was specially good, Beach left the ranch with his dogs swirling around his horse. The dogs picked up the scent three miles from the house, and the chase was on. Twice Beach saw a treetop shake violently, and he knew the dogs had treed the cat. But each time when he got there, the cat was already on his way again.

Beach could hear the dogs yelping in the distance and he speeded up. Suddenly he pushed through a narrow spot on a game trail, and there lay two of his dogs, struck down by Old Rustler.

Beach tossed the dogs into the brush and kicked dirt from a nearby bank over them. "That settles it," he muttered. "Old Rustler may be a veal eater, but he's a dog hater, too. Dog bait will make him forget his blasted caution."

He said nothing when he returned to the ranch, but Lafe, when he came in from feeding the stock, noticed there were only four dogs remaining.

"You had better try your sure-fire trick," he advised Beach, "or you'll lose all of your dogs. He'll get 'em, one by one."

"I'm going to," Beach answered.

LAFE DRURY turned in early that night, leaving the barn door open for Growler to enter. The dog was a creature of fixed habits. He waited until the lights in every building were out, then he trotted around like a night watchman making an inspection. Satisfied that all was well, he entered the barn, climbed the stairs and stretched out on a rug near Lafe's bed.

Lafe awakened at midnight, yawned, and looked down at the floor. Growler wasn't there. He listened, half expecting to hear him barking, though the dog never barked unless intruders were about. The night was quiet. A moon flooded the land, and except for the stamping of horses in the stalls below, there wasn't a sound.

Lafe went downstairs and into the yard. He whistled softly, then more loudly. There was no response. "Damned queer," he muttered. "Come to think about it, Beach acted pretty funny tonight. He didn't cuss like he usually does when Old Rustler gets a critter." He was conscious of a deep, inward excitement. His heart pounded. "If I thought he'd used Growler in some crazy idea of his I'd—"

Lafe stopped his speculating and acted. He threw a saddle onto a horse, then went to a shelf and caught up the gear his father used in cougar hunts. He didn't have any idea of using it, but he wanted to be

prepared for anything unusual that might develop.

Lastly, he put fresh batteries into a flashlight, stuffed several shells into his pocket and took the shotgun that rested on two nails driven into the barn wall.

He rode hard and fast up the canyon, as soon as his horse was properly warmed up. As he neared the region where Old Rustler's tracks were always thickest, he rode more slowly. He stopped often, thrust his fingers between his teeth, and blasted a whistle that would carry a long way on a still night. Then he waited for the yipping that would be Growler's answer to the summons.

Lafe was getting pretty discouraged and had about come to the conclusion he was on a wild goose chase when he heard a distant baying. Growler was on a cat's trail. Lafe listened intently, trying to determine which course the cat was taking. Strangely enough, the dog's baying seemed fixed, constant. Lafe rode toward the sound.

He pushed through a thicket and pulled up on the edge of a game trail. Deer and elk frequently used the trail, and sleek cougars often lurked on the rocks above, often dropping silently down and breaking an animal's neck from the impact.

Growler, Lafe saw, was tied to a stake driven in the center of the trail. He had wound his short chain around the stake until his head was snubbed close up, restricting his movements. He was in a state of high excitement.

"Keep still, you fool," Lafe soothed him. "Do you want to choke yourself to death? I know there's fresh cougar scent in the air, but you leave this cat strictly alone. He's a dog killer."

Lafe's face grew dark as he examined the area around the stake. Beach had set five traps and cleverly concealed them from animals, though a man would instantly recognize their presence. Growler was tied in the center of them—bait for Old Rustler's hate. The cat was certain to be caught by a front or hind trap, either as he attacked or retreated, after killing the dog. There would be a brief, tragic struggle, but during that time, steel jaws would clamp onto a paw.

"A nice set-up, boy," Lafe said to Growler. "But keep your shirt on, and let me spring these traps, first."

He picked up several sticks and sprung the traps. Then he reached for the snap holding the chain to the dog's collar. It was snubbed against the post, and it required all his strength to release it.

He got the snap clear and Growler reared back and shook himself. Then abruptly he wheeled and was gone. "Growler!" Lafe bellowed. "Come back here! Damn it, Growler, come back here or I'll tear the hide offn you."

Ninety-nine times in a hundred Growler obeyed that kind of a command. The hundredth time he disobeyed because the cat scent was stronger than the impulse to obey. And he knew, from experience, that his young master wouldn't tear the hide off him. He knew he would receive high praise for treeing a cat.

The old master, who for some strange reason, had gone away and not returned, invariably praised him. And Lafe, his real master, echoed the father's words.

THE dog raced through thickets, giving tongue, and telling the world he was following a scent so fresh his nostrils picked it out of the air instead of off the ground. Lafe galloped around each thicket, then

tried to overtake the dog before he plunged into another.

Lafe had the shotgun ready for instant use, should Old Rustler take it into his head to double back and attack the dog. The tracks led across a damp area with traces of mud.

Lafe leaned down, turned the flashlight on the cat's tracks and breathed easier. Growler was chasing a young cat. He would probably tree it. Nevertheless, Lafe rode hard. He had an idea Old Rustler might be attracted by the dog's baying.

As Lafe cleared a ridge he saw a treetop directly below shake violently and knew the cat had gone up the tree. He galloped to the spot, but before he could bring the shotgun into action the cat ran half way down, turned and leaped to a lower limb on an adjoining tree. As this limb sagged, the cat took a second and longer leap and landed on a ledge of rock.

Growler's eyes had never left the cat from the moment it climbed the tree. Now he rushed up the steep slope leading to the ledge.

The cat reached a higher ledge and Lafe saw him vanish into an opening in the rocks. He yelled sharply, but the old dog was now crazy with excitement. He bounded into the den after the cat.

"You fool!" Lafe yelled. "You'll get your eyes scratched out! Now I got to get the cuss out of there."

He dismounted, tied his horse and turned just in time to see a huge cat drop onto the ledge and vanish into the den.

"Old Rustler!" Lafe exclaimed, and suddenly the old, terrible fear of cats was on him.

It was odd, he thought, that he hadn't been afraid of the half-grown cougar. Perhaps it was because he had been mounted and well armed when he first saw it. Perhaps, also, it was because the cat was running. And flight always inspires confidence in the pursuer.

Lafe felt the strength drain from his legs, and he had an overpowering impulse to run. He could almost see Old Rustler leaping from the ledge, striking him down, and his fur smothering him, as the cat pelt had almost smothered him years ago, when he was an infant.

"I might get him with the shotgun," he muttered. "I might crawl into the den and blast him. But he might climb some rocky shelf inside the den and drop on me." The very thought of it made him shudder. "I'm a damned coward," he told himself. "Yellow clean through."

He heard Growler's growls and snarls, and the hissing of the great cat. The dog wasn't attacking now. Lafe could tell from the sounds. He was keeping the cat occupied and interested until his men—Jed and Lafe Drury were his men—came up. He knew the old master wanted cats taken alive. He knew he didn't want dogs to mix it with the cats. Sometimes it was pretty hard, when a dog was excited, not to tear into the cats. So he just growled and waited.

LAFE was conscious of some great change, almost a chemical one, taking place in his body. He wanted to break down and sob, not from personal, physical fear, but from sheer disgust with himself. His legs were like lead, refusing to send him forward.

Suddenly he set his jaw, caught up a long pole from the ground, and with the shotgun and his father's

gear dragging from the other hand, he climbed to the ledge. Sure, he was a coward. But there was one decent streak in him. It was the streak that told him the better Lafe Drury couldn't endure living a lifetime with the white-livered Lafe Drury. Better go through one brief span of mental and physical agony while the cat destroyed him, and get it over with.

The entrance to the den was four feet wide and from one to three feet high. Lafe fastened a loop to the end of the pole and let the remainder of the line drag behind him. "If you get a loop around their necks it's harder for 'em to get to you," his father had often said. "Then you can make up your mind whether you want to take 'em alive or not."

He thrust the pole, the gun and the flashlight ahead of him. He couldn't see much, because the cave turned and the roof dropped lower. He could feel the lowest point of the roof catching his clothing, as if to hold him down until the cat could dispose of the dog and then attack the man. It gave him that cornered, trapped feeling, and he could feel the cold sweat saturating his shirt. He started to retreat, but the rock dug into his back. He went ahead, pushing the pole forward and keeping the light and shotgun within reach of his right hand.

Growler began to yip excitedly. His remaining man hadn't failed him and he was sensing victory over the greatest cat of all. "Can't let him down!" Lafe told himself over and over again. "Can't let him down." He turned another corner and twin pools of flame leaped at him as the light struck the cat's eyes.

Old Rustler snarled and got ready to charge the man. In the chill cave white vapor gushed from the cat's mouth as he breathed. It dissipated slowly. "I've got to blast him," Lafe told himself, "or he'll tear into me. Buckshot at this distance will stop him cold."

Then Lafe saw Growler just beyond the cat. The dog had protected himself by backing into a narrow space in the rock. From this point he could worry the cat, and only his head was exposed.

The cat knew what he could do with a blow on the back, but he wasn't too sure about the snarls and gleaming fangs. He had been debating this problem when Lafe had entered the den.

Lafe turned the light about the interior. He saw a narrow exit leading to the moonlight. It was too small for either the dog or Old

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

Rustler, but the young cougar had managed to squeeze through it and escape.

"No chance to call Growler out of there," Lafe grunted. "He wouldn't leave. And, anyway, the cat would tear him apart as he passed. There's only one course left. I'll have to take him alive."

He lashed the flashlight pretty well up the pole, then arranged the loop so it would hang from the end. He grasped the pole in both hands and thrust it forward. The light blinded the cat's eyes until it was too late for him to realize the purpose of the loop and knock it aside with his paw. As soon as the loop was around the cat's neck, Lafe grasped the rope, pulled hard and tightened it.

Keeping the rope tight, and at the same time backing away, was the toughest part of the capture. The cat shook his head angrily and pawed at the rope, but his efforts merely tightened the loop.

"If I can get him around the first turn," Lafe grunted, "then I can kill him without hitting Growler." There was a moment's silence, then he asked himself, "Why kill him? Dad wouldn't." He was conscious of a growing confidence in himself. He had, for the moment at least, licked the old fear.

LAFE backed from the den, paying out sufficient line as he went to keep the loop tight, but at the same time not pull the cat toward the entrance. The instant he stood on the ledge, he tossed the loose end of the rope over a limb, caught it and drew it tight. Then he commenced to pull.

For perhaps five minutes he didn't gain more than two feet of rope. Then suddenly it slacked, and he reminded himself of his father's old warning. "Slack a line and you lose your trout, most likely. Slack a line on a cat, and you may have him swarmin' all over you."

Lafe ran with the line to take up the slack. Then suddenly he snubbed it on a stub left by a broken limb. A split second later the cat bounded from the cave and launched his tawny body through space, intent only on clearing the ledge and its dangers. He set his feet to strike the tree and rebound off through space, but as he hit and rebounded, the rope tightened again. He swung into space, a clawing, snarling, bundle of fur and claws.

Lafe grinned for the first time that night. And he had a hunch that perhaps his father was grinning in approval, too. He looped the cat's hind legs, then the front ones. Old Rustler was a big cat, all right. Not quite as large as Beach had estimated, but one of the biggest ever captured in these parts. Lafe put a leather hood over the cat's head so that he couldn't bite, then he lowered the hogtied animal to his horse.

Day was just breaking when Lafe led into the ranch barn, but the sun wouldn't be up for sometime yet. He dropped the bound cat into one of his father's old cages, then rode to see an old friend who lived a mile away, old Allan Sutter, who made a living by leasing his bottom land for the grazing of horses. "Morning, Sutter," Lafe said when the old man answered his knock. "Can I borrow a spring wagon and span of horses? I caught Old Rustler last night."

"The hell you did," Sutter said appreciatively. "Good work, son. Three hundred dollars from the Cattleman's Association, twenty-five dollars bounty, and—"

"And at least five hundred dollars from some zoo. He's a famous cat.

A circus might buy him," Lafe said.

"Enough for you to get out of the country and make a start," Sutter declared.

"Enough to make a start right here, as dad did years ago," retorted Lafe. "I've got orders in my pocket right now for live cats. And more'll be comin' in."

"The trouble is," Sutter reminded him, "you're Beach's hired man, and like as not, he'll claim all you get for Old Rustler. He's mean enough to make his claim stick, too. I don't like to discourage a young feller who's made such a first-rate start as you're makin', Lafe, but I don't see how you can outsmart Beach."

"Well, as dad would've said, if I can't outsmart him, I deserve to lose," Lafe replied.

HE hitched up the horses to the spring wagon and drove back to the homestead. He put the horse he had ridden into the stable and rubbed him down. Then he loaded the cage onto the spring wagon and drove to the house. He knocked on the door and yelled, "Time to get up." This done, he went into the kitchen and built a fire in the stove, as he did every morning.

A few minutes later Beach came downstairs, grumbling and in a vile mood.

"I'm quitting, Beach," Lafe told him.

"Quittin'?" Beach said angrily. "You can't do that."

"Sure, I can," Lafe declared. "It was agreed, I could quit or be fired without notice. You can apply my wages on the purchase price of Growler."

"I won't sell," Beach said in a surly tone.

Lafe shrugged. "Suit yourself about that."

"What're you goin' to live on?" Beach demanded.

"Cats. I've decided to be a cat man. Made a good start, too," Lafe said. "Take a look outside."

Beach stalked through the door and looked at the spring wagon and the cage. "That's my cage," he said. "You can't use it."

"No, it's mine," Lafe said. "It was one of the things that wasn't sold in the auction. And I borrowed Sutter's wagon."

"You took the cat from the trap I set," Beach accused. "He's mine, and by—"

"I went into a den and noosed him," Lafe interrupted. "You've got no claim, Beach."

"The hell I haven't." Beach was purple with fury, and he was thinking fast. "You're my hired man, Lafe," he declared craftily. "And that cat's crop, same as beef or hay."

"I'm your hired man from sunrise in the morning until sunset at night," Lafe said. "The rest of the time is my own. We agreed on that. And I roped the cat around two o'clock this mornin'."

He got into the spring wagon and kicked off the brake. "I'll be back," he said. "I want to buy Growler, the horse, and some day I'll be in the market for the homestead."

"Ain't none of 'em for sale to you at any price," Beach declared wrathfully.

"I'm not so sure about that," Lafe retorted as he started the horses. "When folks around here learn that you used Growler for cat bait, somethin' pretty tough is liable to happen to you suddenly. Think it over."

Lafe drove off, but at the first turn he glanced back. It looked to him as though Beach was thinking it over, all right.

THE END.

BURIED TREASURE

By E. C. LINCOLN

WS—6D

For the second time that night Dale Powers woke with a start. Something, or somebody, was surely prowling about in the darkness outside the cabin! Dale lay motionless in his blankets, listening with every fiber of his being for a repetition of the sound that had broken in on his sleep.

Though his head was close by the open window, only the usual undertone of a summer night in Montana reached his ears. Crickets sang monotonously. Down in the creek a hundred yards away, a beaver was splashing the water, and, far off, Dale heard the mournful music of a dog coyote. His ears told him that all was well; yet the sixth sense of the range land signaled danger till his pulses throbbed with excitement.

Quietly Dale slipped from the bunk, dressed, fumbled about till he found the ancient single-action Colts which had been a present from his uncle. With his thumbnail he split open a box of shells. He rolled the cylinder to the side and loaded by touch. Treading cautiously lest a board squeak under his feet, he stepped to the door, crouching low, as he reached above his head, turned the wooden knob and shoved the door out.

In the blackness of the night outside he could see only dim shadows —the dwarf cottonwood his uncle had planted, the wagon that had stood out in the weather till it was falling apart, the greater bulk of the stable roof cutting into the stars. But there, between the stable and the fence, there, surely, was a shadow that didn't belong!

Dale flattened himself out in the doorway.

"You!" he called. "What you doin' here?"

Orange flame split the darkness for answer, dazzling him. Bullets crashed into the door frame above his head, showered him with splinters. His own gun spoke once, leaping in his hand. Then he rolled to his feet and sprang sideways, the cabin behind him.

Again the orange flashes stabbed the night. Dale counted them as he replied. Six!

He stumbled forward, firing as he ran. Before him he heard flying footsteps. They ceased abruptly with the squeak and strain of wire. The thud of a falling body followed, then a breathless oath of anger. "Sure lucky I put up that fence!" thought Dale.

An instant later he was wrestling with a sinewy bulk that struck and kicked and struck again as they rolled over and over in the dense growth of weeds. Only when Dale found himself, for the fraction of a second, on top with his right hand free to aim one smashing blow at his attacker's head, did the combat cease. Dale stood up, the would-be dry-gulcher's gun in his left hand, and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

"Whoosh!" he grunted, running a hand over aching ribs. "Sure meant business, mister. Let's see what you look like."

The unconscious man was heavy, awkward to carry. But at last Dale had dumped the limp form on his bunk and lighted the kerosene lamp on the pine table. In the smoky light he studied the damaged features of his captive with interest.

"You look plenty tough," he soliloquized as he emptied the man's pockets of a dozen extra shells. "You'd look tough even was your nose on straight. Reckon we'll see what you got to say for yourself."

He held a pail of water above the damaged face and poured steadily. When at last the man showed signs of returning consciousness, gasping

and choking under the descending flood, the boy sat beside the bunk with his old single-action Colts resting suggestively on his knee.

"Lay back an' take it easy, feller," he advised. "Scott Beatty sent you, didn't he? Don't try to lie about it. Wanted me bumped off, eh? Thought mebbe I'd forget, an' leave what he wants layin' right out in plain sight?"

In the defiant scowl of the man on the bunk was a desperate cunning. Dale saw it. "Don't try any tricks," he warned. "Reckon I ought to plug you, but I jest thought of somethin' better. Scott, he'd a heap sight rather have you dead than alive to tell on him in court."

Ten minutes later, one Goldie Moran was leading the way, with Dale's gun poked suggestively against the small of his back, to where his horse stood tethered in the darkness of the willows. Dale held the reins while Moran mounted.

"Now, feller," said Dale, "east of you is Blaine City—ten miles. Scott Beatty lives there. West, if you go far enough, is Butte. You're goin' to Butte. See?"

Dale stepped back and slapped the horse on the haunches. A moment afterward, as he listened to the roll of hoofs on the trail which led to the county road west, he spoke aloud:

"Beatty's begun the rough stuff," he murmured to the stars. "We'll find out who'll finish it!"

IT was something more than a month since Dale Powers had received a telegram from Scott Beatty, attorney at law in Blaine City, asking him to come for a conference regarding his uncle's estate. It was Dale's first intimation that Otto Yoast, an eccentric old codger, was dead. Dale felt half inclined to disregard the summons. It was years since he had anything to do with his uncle Otto, although he was the old man's only living relative, and giving up a cowpunching job for the "estate" of a man who had never seemed to have more than two silver dollars to jingle together, was rather foolhardy. Nevertheless, after much cogitation, Dale drew his time and bought himself a ticket to Blaine City.

It was a tall young man, rather ill at ease in a travel-worn serge suit that seemed cut for a much smaller figure, who stood in the doorway of Scott Beatty's office several days later.

"I'm Dale Powers, from Oklahoma," Dale announced, twirling his battered Stetson which he held before him like a shield. "Reckon you must be the Mr. Beatty that sent me that telegram?"

Scott Beatty sprang from his swivel chair, a moist hand outstretched in greeting. "Sure!" he boomed heartily. "Glad you've come, Mr. Powers. Set down here, so's we can talk comfortable."

From the upper drawer of his desk the lawyer produced a box of foil-wrapped cigars which he tendered to his guest. He struck a match and held it out for Dale's convenience before lighting his own stogie.

"Now then," he began briskly, "we'll get right down to business. The last will and testament of your uncle, Otto Yoast, made you his only heir, like I said in my wire. Fine man, your uncle was, Mr. Powers. Kind of wild, but a square shooter. I ought to know. Couple of years ago, you know, he was in kind of bad. Bunch of men—four of 'em—held up the Gilt Edge stage one mornin', dropped the guard, an' got off with right round forty thousand dollars in dust. The law

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seemed to think your uncle was mixed up in it. Couldn't locate any of the others. I . . . I got him clear at his trial." Beatty paused and nodded thoughtfully, tilting back in his chair to gaze at the ceiling. Dale's steady gaze seemed to be disconcerting him a bit. "Otto wrote to you pretty regular, didn't he?" he finished a little uncomfortably.

"Nope," said Dale. "Not often. Used to send me a present every Christmas, though. Last Christmas—"

"Yes?" queried Scott Beatty, leaning forward eagerly.

"Sure; last Christmas, too," finished Dale, the hint of a twinkle in the depths of his blue eyes.

For the young man from Oklahoma was no fool. Even as the Blaine City lawyer had been taking his measure, he had been sizing up the attorney in his turn. Dale didn't like the man's moist handshake, nor the way his quick glance shifted when you tried to meet it, nor the exaggerated warmth of his welcome. If this man was so anxious to know what Uncle Otto had sent him for Christmas, maybe it was just as well to keep the fact to himself for a while longer.

Whatever disappointment the lawyer may have felt, it was well concealed. "I suppose you're anxious to know about the will," he smiled. "Don't get too excited about it. Otto didn't have much to leave you, after all. Nothin' but a little three-hundred-acre ranch out on Skull Crick that nobody ever made a livin' on."

Dale stirred uneasily in his chair. "If that's how things stand," he queried, a touch of irritation in his voice, "how come you get me clean up here from Oklahoma when there ain't nothin' to come after?"

Scott Beatty was watching him

narrowly. "That's all the tangible assets," he answered, "but there's maybe somethin' else. Here's what happened:

"Back last November, Highpockets Jordan—he's an old prospector that used to mine round in the Blues ever since anybody can remember—he blows in, fair loaded down with gold, coarse stuff that makes our eyes stick out. Won't tell where he got it. Gets chummy with your uncle, though. The two of 'em was drunk together pretty near a whole month. When Highpockets is cleaned out, he loads up his pack ass and heads back for the hills. The boys try to follow him, but they run into a blizzard the first night out and have to quit.

"Now listen." Beatty leaned forward impressively. "Day after Highpockets leaves, Otto comes to me—he ain't really sobered up yet—and he says, "Scotty, you and me have had our differences, but I ain't goin' to let 'em interfere with business. You made out my will a while back and there ain't another lawyer I'd trust any more'n I would you. I got a secret,' he says. 'It'll make this here country a different place,' he says. 'Now, somethin' might happen to me, and I'd hate it should get lost. So I writ it down careful and buried it out on the ranch. And where I buried it is writ out on this piece of paper. And jest so's not to tempt you too much, Scotty,' Otto says, jokin', 'I've tore the paper in half. One half I've sent to my nephew down in Oklahoma. Here's the other half. Keep it in the safe for me.'"

The attorney paused in his narrative to thump the desk for emphasis. "You see what he done, Mr. Powers. He tore that paper like it was a chink laundry ticket, and the half I put in the safe don't help none at all without the half you got!

"Well, Highpockets never did get back to his strike. Froze to death in that blizzard. They found what was left of him over on North Fork this April. And a week before that, your uncle had died. A fight starts out front of the Gold Bar one evenin', and when Otto comes runnin' out to look he stops a bullet that's meant for somebody else, quite accidentallike."

Drawing a deep breath, the attorney exhaled a cloud of smoke. "So," he finished carelessly, "we reckon that when we put the piece of paper you got, with the one I got, we'll know where Highpockets' lost mine is at."

For a moment Dale sat thinking. Then he grinned. "Ain't you sort of talkin', mister, like I got somethin' that belongs to you? I don't know no more law'n a coyote, but the way I figure it, when Uncle Otto left me what you call his estate, the half of that paper you've got ought to go with it."

Scott Beatty turned an angry red, and his voice lost the tone of honeyed conciliation which had marked it heretofore. "Nothin' of the sort!" he rasped. "Otto had information that belonged to this whole community. If he'd lived ten days more, we'd all have our claims staked out at Highpockets' diggin's. Be sensible, young man. If you hand us that paper peaceable, maybe you'll get a chance to stake a couple of claims yourself. If you don't, you'll find you're buckin' the strongest men in Blaine City. You ain't got a chance in the world. Well, how about it?" he asked, thrusting forward his lean jaw.

Dale gathered his long legs under him and rose from his chair. Gone, now, was the friendly grin with which he had introduced himself a

half-hour before. "Mr. Beatty," he said soberly, "I'm goin' out and squat on that ranch my uncle left me. If you think I got any paper you want, come and get it. But come lookin' for trouble, 'cause you'll sure strike plenty!"

He turned on his heel and strode from the office, leaving the lawyer foaming at the mouth with anger. Outside, in the warm sunshine of Main Street, Dale stopped to collect his thoughts.

"Hell!" he muttered. "If Uncle Otto ever sent me any paper like that shyster talked about, I sure never got it. Nothin' came last year but that old single-action six-gun, and the letter sayin' to take care of it careful. Wasn't no sense tellin' that to the old fox, though, I reckon."

SO Dale Powers settled down on the tiny ranch property that Otto Yoast had left him. He found the land, valueless as it undoubtedly was, shot full of shallow holes that showed the fresh earth naked to the sun; and he recognized the results of the blind and hurried search that had evidently been going on during the six months since his uncle's death, going on till the searchers, despairing of reaching their goal through sheer luck, had decided to take the risk of cutting him in on the deal.

He bought himself two saddle ponies and a dozen head of white-face yearlings, almost exhausting his limited capital. But when he appealed to the bank for a loan, he discovered the first of Scott Beatty's partners in the plot against him. For the president of the First National, B. J. Willis, turned him down flat. Not only did he refuse Dale absolutely, but he implied that the bank had no sympathy with any rancher who obviously did not have the best interests of Blaine City at heart.

Within two weeks Dale Powers knew that the whole community was against him. He sensed resentment even in the glance of passing strangers. He counted up a score of instances, some of them perhaps imaginary, of petty persecution. His fences came down unaccountably. One pony, shod by the Blaine City blacksmith, went lame. None of the general stores would give him credit.

Yet, for a reason not at all connected with his dilemma, Dale found himself strangely and quite perfectly happy. It was this way:

On one of his earliest tours of inspection about his new property, he had ridden up the creek a short distance to see what the surrounding country might be like. Hardly was he out of sight of his own wire when he was surprised to see a white pony, saddled but bridleless, come trotting out of a dense growth of cottonwoods and willows. After the pony ran a girl on foot, a broken bridle trailing in her hand.

"Can you catch him for me?" she called anxiously when she saw Dale.

Dale shook out his rope. The white pony dodged, and dodged again, snorting. Then a wide loop settled down over his head and he quickly lost all interest in the game. With the runaway peaceably in tow, Dale rode up to the girl.

"Thank you," she said, smiling with relief. "I was just fool enough to tie Whitey to a branch. Served me right when he pulled back and broke my bridle."

Dale stared wordlessly. He knew, right then, that whatever happened it was mighty lucky he had come to Montana. He liked the hint of laughter in the friendly gray eyes, the sturdy, graceful swing of her

step. And the dimples that came and were gone again at the corners of her mouth were bewitching.

"I'm Dot Hendricks," the girl went on, her color rising at the closeness of his scrutiny.

"And I'm Dale Powers," he said, finding his tongue with difficulty. "You . . . I live down the crick a piece. Do . . . do you come here often?" He broke off, puzzled. For the girl's face had changed with some emotion that certainly resembled recognition.

"I've heard of you," she said gently. "My dad owns just about all the land you can see around here. Yes, I do come here often, almost every afternoon. It's such a nice place to think in."

Dale had slipped the bit into the white pony's mouth. The girl swung up into the saddle with the quick, lithe grace of a young animal. "Every afternoon, almost," she repeated. "My dad doesn't like you, you know. Be careful, won't you?" Then the white pony whirled and streaked away before Dale could get his breath.

As quickly as that it had happened.

In the days that followed, Dale wished a thousand times that he had never allowed Scott Beatty to believe he possessed the key to Highpockets Jordan's gold strike. His own search of the ranch was fruitless, as he knew it must be. Yet the lawyer would never believe the truth. Against Dale were ranged forces which he could not long withstand, forces led by the unscrupulous attorney, with Willis, the banker, and Dot's own father, Sam Hendricks, the most powerful cattleman in the Basin, lending at least their moral support to his plans.

This last the boy had learned from Dot Hendricks herself. Their friendship had ripened quickly. Soon he had told her the truth; whereupon, like a wise young woman, she had counseled waiting.

It was good advice, Dale thought, especially since Dot had declared she would be waiting for him. But around him he felt the toils of Scott Beatty's power draw tighter each day, till his face grew thin, and his eyes hard and keen from eternal watching. His uncle Otto's single-action six-gun swung always at his thigh. And now, at the end of a month, the showdown had come. If the lawyer had sent a gunman by night, there were no lengths to which he would not go!

ON the morning following Dale's battle in the dark, the boy threw his saddle on the bay horse and loped toward Blaine City with his teeth set hard. He entered Scott Beatty's office without knocking, his hand resting on the butt of the ancient six-gun.

The lawyer's crafty face went saffron as he faced the younger man.

"Beatty," rapped Dale, "a friend of yours paid me a visit last night. Now he's where you can't find him. But let me tell you this: if there's an honest court in this country he'll testify somethin' mighty interestin' when the time comes!"

Scott Beatty leaped to his feet, shaking with rage. "That's a damned lie!" he spat. "You—"

Dale's right fist jerked upward. It cracked home on its mark.

"Folks don't call me that but once," said Dale to the man who lay on the paper-strewn floor of the office rubbing his bruised jaw tenderly. "And here's somethin' else to think over: If my half of that paper is worth a lot to you, your half is worth jest as much to me.

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From now on, watch yourself, mister!"

Dale loped out of town with his knuckles still aching pleasantly from their righteous exercise. He sang as he rode, and he loosened Uncle Otto's six-gun in its holster with a gesture of bravado. He almost wished he did have the other half of that paper, just for the fun of taking Scott Beatty's half away from him.

Splashing up the silver water, he loped through the shallow ford of Spring Creek. He trotted across the flat, down into Rock Creek coulee, riding so carelessly that when the bay horse slipped on a rolling stone and went down on his nose, he himself shot over the horse's head in a clean somersault that ended painfully.

Dale picked himself up with a rueful grin at his foolishness. He flexed his arms, bent his knees, drew a deep breath, and decided that no bones were broken. Save for a scratched knee the bay horse, too, was whole and sound. But there among the rocks lay Uncle Otto's Christmas present, the ancient six-gun. And the left butt plate lay beside it, split into two pieces.

Dale leaned down regretfully to pick up the marred weapon. Then he uttered a cry, and his heart went hammering at his ribs with excitement. For along the spring, in the hollow butt of the six-gun, lay a folded bit of paper, yellow with oil!

He pried it out hurriedly and spread it open with trembling fingers. It read:

—ch from the stable
—take line with
—point 60 ft.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his senses. Yet here, surely, was the paper that Scott Beatty was searching for, the key to the secret of Highpockets' lost mine! Uncle Otto had sent it to

him last Christmas, after all. The cagy old fellow knew the gun would have to be thoroughly cleaned sometime. Dale Powers rode on home in a whirling mist of plans.

He was barely conscious of eating dinner and left the dishes unwashed in the sink. He counted the hours minute by minute till three o'clock, when he saddled again and rode up the creek to the grassy opening among the willows where Dot, he hoped, would contrive to meet him. He was at the spot almost an hour too early, wearing a beaten path in the grass from striding back and forth to quiet his impatience. But at last he heard the trample of the white pony's hoofs on the soft earth, and the screen of willows parted.

"I've got it!" he called, before the smiling girl could slip to the ground. "Uncle Otto's six-gun got smashed on the rocks. It was in the butt. Look!"

"It was— What was, stupid?" laughed Dot as he forced the crumpled paper into her hands.

"It's the key!" cried Dale. "It's that paper Scott Beatty wants. Read it, Dot. Don't you see what it means to us?"

The girl read slowly, her brows puckered in thought. Without a word she handed the paper back to Dale.

Her silence disturbed and hurt him. "Aren't you glad?" he queried. "It isn't everybody has a million dollars handed to 'em like this."

But Dot shook her head. "I don't see that you're one bit better off than you were before, Dale," she objected. "You haven't the ghost of a chance to get Scott's paper from him, and you know it. You're fighting too many people. You'll be gambling your life for a paper that may not be worth a plugged nickel. If I were you, I'd just forget it."

By this time Dale felt definitely offended. "My uncle wasn't a miner, but he wasn't crazy, neither," he retorted. "If he went to all that trouble, he knew what he was doin', I reckon. Guess we'd better talk about somethin' else," he said stiffly.

Taken all in all, Dale felt that the afternoon, of which he had expected so much, was pretty nearly a complete washout. He was sober and morose when he said good-by to Dot. Not once did he break into his customary whistle as he rode down the creek toward home. When he reached the cabin he closed the door, hung a blanket over the window, and fell to studying the paper again.

TWO hours passed before Dale would acknowledge to himself that without Scott Beatty's half to go with his own he could do nothing. He pondered on Uncle Otto's purpose in sending him the paper so carefully hidden. When at last he went to bed he tossed restlessly, his brain busy with one wild scheme after another for turning the tables on his enemies, rejecting each in succession as its obvious impossibility became evident to him.

In the morning he turned, with a sense of relief, to the routine work of the ranch, which gave him an outlet for his nervous energy without the necessity of thinking. Repairs on the wire fence suggested that a loose hinge on the stable door needed fixing. One thing led to another until the morning was almost gone. Then he returned to the cabin and set about his noon meal.

He was busy slicing spuds into a frying pan on the stove when a sudden scurry of light hoofs and a quick scattering of earth before the cabin door set his blood tingling.

It was Dot, flushed of face and

breathless. The white pony, thrown back on his haunches, was dripping wet.

"Dale, listen to me!" called the girl as Dale ran to her stirrup. "Scott Beatty came out to the house this morning. Jud Willis came with him. They talked with dad for almost an hour. I listened under the window. They're coming after that paper, Dale! Scott wanted to set a gang on you—make you tell, but dad wouldn't stand for that. Now they're going to offer to buy you out. They'll start with five thousand, but they'll go to ten!"

Dale let out a whoop of joy. "Got 'em licked!" he shouted. "Got 'em licked, and they know it. Say, we wouldn't take a million for that paper. We—"

"Oh, Dale!" The girl's voice was vibrant with appeal. "It isn't that. Don't you see? You mustn't take a chance now. With ten thousand dollars we can be married right away. Take it, Dale. Take it to please me."

There was silence for a long minute as Dale stood there, torn between the lure of gold and the desire to please the girl he loved.

"Quick!" gasped Dot. "They'll be here any time. I came round by the coulee trail. Promise?"

He nodded slowly. "You win, Dot," he said.

"I knew you'd see it my way," she said radiantly. She leaned over the horn and kissed him. "Now I'm going down and hide in the willows where I can watch what happens. If you need me, Mr. Oklahoma, just sing out loud."

Back in the kitchen the spuds were sending up a cloud of smoke. Dale hurried to set the blackened frying pan off the stove, and when he turned to the door again three riders were coming through the ranch gate. Dale acknowledged their greetings shortly. Scott Beatty swung down from his horse. Sam Hendricks and the banker remained in their saddles.

"Young feller," began the attorney, his bruised and swollen jaw moving with some difficulty, "we won't waste words. We'll buy that paper off you at a reasonable figure. It's your last chance. You'd better accept."

Dale glanced up without enthusiasm. "Yeah?" he queried. "And what's your notion of a reasonable figure?"

"Five thousand dollars," rapped out the lawyer. "Five thousand, and not one cent more."

Dale laughed. "Twenty," he said. "And ten more if I have to wait till tomorrow. I jest burned some spuds, and it makes me sort of short-tempered."

"You're a fool!" yelled Scott Beatty. He climbed back on his mare and jerked her head around angrily. Sam Hendricks and the banker turned with him. Dale waved a mocking farewell.

He stepped back into the kitchen and began to count. Before he had reached a hundred he heard them returning. He stepped outside to receive the news.

Scott Beatty pointed at him with a shaking forefinger. "Ten! And that's final," he roared.

Dale scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well," he said at last, "it's a pretty cheap gold strike at that money, but I'm takin' you up. Don't see no other way to get rid of you. For the good of the country, like you said, I'll hand over Uncle Otto's paper for ten thousand dollars."

A moment later the three men were pressing about the pine table in Dale's cabin, while he set pen

and ink before them. They made no attempt, now, to hide their excitement. Their hands trembled, as one after another each man signed a check for his share and handed it over.

"Thanks, gents," Dale acknowledged. Then he removed the old six-gun from its holster and turned the latter upside down. A folded yellow paper fell out. "There she is," he said.

Scott Beatty snatched at the precious document. From the pocket of his check book he extracted its mate. He put the fragments on the table, matching them.

Four men bent over the table now. Four pairs of eyes glued themselves to the torn sheet and read:

> On my ranch from stable
> northwest corner take line
> Black Butte east point 60 ft.

"That's her!" rejoiced the lawyer. "Start from the northwest corner of the stable, and go sixty feet on a line with the east point of Black Butte. We'll have it in ten minutes! Lend us a pick and shovel, Powers!"

WITH the paper to direct them, finding the spot was a simple matter. But the sun-baked gumbo made hard digging. One after another the three treasure hunters, unaccustomed to such labor, stepped into the slowly deepening hole and dripped perspiration under the hot summer sun. And though they worked frenziedly, shouting aloud to cheer each other on, it was nearer an hour than the ten minutes Scott Beatty had promised, before the banker's pick brought up a fragment of rotted sacking.

"We got her!" whooped Sam Hendricks, grasping the shovel and pushing the banker out of the hole.

A moment later they had reached their goal. Inside the remains of

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Canadian readers must remit with order.

the gunny sack was a cheap steel cash box. Scott scraped it free from clinging earth and broke the lock on a stone. Within the box was an envelope. The attorney read aloud, exultantly, the inscription which it bore:

This is my secret, which ought to be worth a lot to somebody. OTTO YOAST.

Scott Beatty tore the envelope. His lips opened. Then suddenly his thin face went a sickly white, and the paper fluttered from his shaking fingers. Dale bent to pick it up. When he straightened again the lawyer was already thirty feet away, sprinting desperately toward the dozing horses.

Frozen with amazement, they watched him hurl his long body into the saddle, then spur frantically as the startled animal tore away down the dusty trail to vanish around a spur of rimrock.

"Gone plumb loco!" breathed Dale. Then his eyes fell on the paper in his hand, and his heart almost stopped beating as he read the penciled words:

Scotty, you double-crossing crook, this got you like I knew it would. You never could keep them greedy fingers away from easy money. You thought I knew where Highpockets' mine was. Well, I don't; and I don't believe he ever had any. How do you like that? You had it coming.

You talked me into that stage holdup, then got me clear at the trial so I wouldn't let on what I knew. Then you double-crossed the three of us and kept the whole $40,000 yourself. It was you that shot the messenger. You killed Ed Kemp to shut his mouth. You'll maybe get me the same way. But Big Joe is safe in San Quentin, and he'll testify when the time comes.

I'm hoping there'll be witnesses when you dig this up. And this secret is easy worth a million, like I said, because it's worth more than that for this country to be rid of a murdering crook like you. Reckon this makes us even. OTTO.

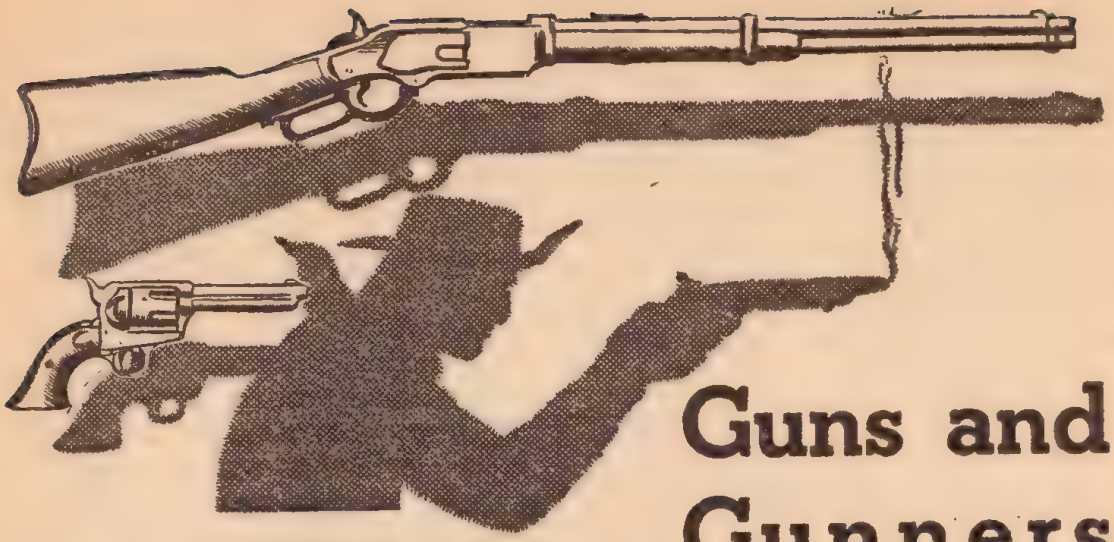
As he finished the astonishing missive, Dale became conscious of the two men reading over his shoulder. He turned to face them, but before a word was spoken, quick, pattering hoofs came around the corral, and Dot Hendricks, drawing up her white pony, smiled innocently down upon the agitated group.

"Hullo, dad," she greeted. "And Mr. Willis. Oh, yes, and there's Dale. I didn't know you knew Dale, dad. What on earth made Mr. Beatty hurry off that way? And what *are* you men doing?"

Sam Hendricks gazed at his daughter reproachfully. He stared at Dale. Then, slowly, his eyes took on understanding, and his heavy shoulders began to shake. "As for Mr. Beatty," he drawled, "I reckon, Dot, he's jest tryin' to get a little start on the sheriff. And as for us, I . . . I reckon one crook and two old fools has been chippin' in for somebody's wedding present."

And he winked at Dale.

THE END.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

THE annual reports on hunting accidents are beginning to pour in. This total figure of accidents with firearms is appalling—and so unnecessary. Hundreds of these accidents are checked through various official reports. Perhaps you will be interested to learn a bit about these and how the accident rate can be greatly reduced in the future.

For the most part, accidents as tabulated in our files are of a hunting nature. This does not include the accidents occurring at home due to cleaning unloaded guns or from children playing with them, or similar problems. We have concentrated chiefly on the accidents that occur while hunting.

So-called hunting accidents are classified as self-inflicted and inflicted by others. Strange as it may seem, the number of self-inflicted accidents closely approaches that under the classifications "inflicted by others."

One can safely state that ninety-nine and nine tenths percent of the self-inflicted accidents are due to carelessness. If you stand a loaded and cocked gun up against a tree it may fall down and be discharged. If you happened to be at the wrong end, you might get the benefit of that discharge. If you wish to climb over a tree, through a fence, or windfalls and blow-downs, first place the gun on "safe." If necessary, unload it. Pass it through the obstruction with the muzzle pointed away from you. Then move down a ways, six to eight feet, from where you passed the gun through, and make your own way to the other side. Go back, pick up the gun, and reload it or prepare it for firing. It takes but little added time and it's good safety insurance.

Loaded guns should never be carried in autos. In many States this is a violation of the law. Many a loaded gun has been discharged in pulling it from the rear seat of a car, usually with the muzzle towards the shooter. It takes but a short time to reload. Carry your guns empty.

There is absolutely no excuse for a gun being discharged during the cleaning process. Consider any form of a gun as always loaded until you prove otherwise. Do not trust to

memory. It is possible that you unloaded it and that someone else reloaded it.

Accidents inflicted by others may be subdivided into two classes—those of mistaken identity in which the victim is shot under the assumption that he is game, and the so-called "accidental" cases due to carelessness of some person carrying a gun.

Never carry a gun with the muzzle pointed towards your companion. If you have to walk single file, carry your gun in ready position across the body. Then, if you should stumble and the gun become discharged, it will do no damage. Did you ever walk through the woods with a companion and turn around to ask him a question, only to discover that the muzzle of his gun was pointed at your back due to the way he was carrying it?

If you are out camping, make it a practice to unload your gun when you approach within a hundred yards of the camp. Keep it unloaded until you start out again. Then do not reload again until you are well on your way, at least a hundred yards from the camp itself. If you get into the habit of this, accidents at camp cannot occur.

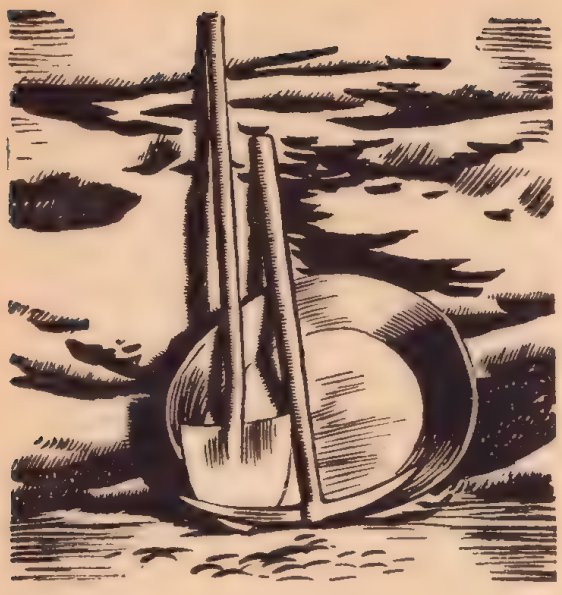
In the woods you should be extremely careful to make certain that what you think you see is game. I have talked many a shooter into firing at a stump by telling him it was a deer. He would look a couple of times and be convinced. Your eyes can play tricks on you. Always look two or three times to make certain that what you shoot at is not human.

Strange as it may seem, many a man is shot and listed as "mistaken for a squirrel." This may sound absurd until you stop to analyze it. In dense cover in the woods, one frequently does not see all of a person. A gray or brown sweater or jacket carelessly drooped over a tree limb while the hunter is resting can readily be mistaken for a squirrel on a hasty first glimpse. Protect yourself by wearing all the red you can get on. This should include red headgear, red jacket, red breeches, and, if possible, red stockings. But, never use red stockings with a white top. The white top can frequently be mistaken for a deer's flag.

Never wear old army clothes while hunting. They look suspiciously like a deer, and if you wear them you are inviting a bullet. The same applies to black. Black clothing and black leather jackets can readily be mistaken for bear and similar game. Finally, be certain before you press the trigger that what you are shooting at is not human. If you cannot see your game well enough to be positive as to what it may be, better hold your fire. Move in closer and wait until you get a proper view.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, Nw York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

This week George B., of Green Bay, Wisconsin, has asked us for some desert travel tips. "Pointers on travel and equipment," his letter says, "that will help a prospector who is a tenderfoot on such matters, but wants to put in some time in a mineral country down in the desert Southwest this winter."

All set, George. Here's a condensed set of do's and don't's for the desert prospector.

Don't start off on a desert trail or road without first ascertaining in town the actual condition the road is in, and where waterholes, wells, or springs are (if any) along the course of the road or close to it. Plunging far distances into the desert and gambling on coming out with a mine or a good gold prospect is all right. But never gamble on finding water. The prospector *must* know his next waterhole. That means not only providing himself with good maps, showing well and waterhole locations in the country you expect to prospect, but also a lot of question-asking right in the town from which you set out concerning the *actual current conditions of such water-supply sources.*

Do, if you are going to use pack animals on a desert trip, get creatures accustomed to the desert. Animals unused to arid country are apt to grow weak and sick on salty water and scant forage. Sandy trails sometimes bother their feet, too. For all around economy, ease of feeding and usefulness the burro is still impossible to beat. Burros are to the old desert rates of the Southwest what sled dogs are to the prospector in the frozen north.

Don't, unless you are desert-wise, attempt to tackle the deep, distant off-the-trail sections of the desert alone. Too many accidents can happen, and lack of aid, or of someone to send for aid, may cost you your life.

Do, as far as clothing equipment goes, remember that desert trails, and the sharp fragments of hard rocks that cover desert canyon floors and the slopes of arid mountains are tough on shoe leather. Wear stout boots, calf-high. Hobnails will prolong the wear of sole leather. A felt hat thick enough and wide enough of brim to shut off the rays of the sun is another "must." Rough camp togs will do for the rest. But take along clothes suitable for both hot and cold weather. Nights can get frosty, even in the desert, where radiation of the sun's daytime heat is extremely rapid. And if your search takes you up into the higher elevations of a desert mountain range, you are going to find a campfire and a warm windbreaker, such as a leather jacket or light Mackinaw, mighty comfortable in the evenings and early-morning hours. By the same

token, a good, warm, all-wool blanket is best for bedding down in at night.

Don't forget, in making up your grub list, to include an ample supply of the staples in case you stay out longer than you originally intended. That means flour, sugar, tea, coffee, rice, beans, oatmeal and bacon. Go light on bacon in your diet unless you are camped near water. Bacon makes a fellow thirsty. A jackrabbit bagged now and then will afford a little fresh meat on your menu. Canned tomatoes are excellent thirst quenchers, but are bulky if you attempt to carry too much of them. Similiarly canned citrus fruit juices will put some important vitamins into your system. They, too, are bulky if too large an amount is taken along.

Do, if you are not taking a tent, at least provide yourself with a good canvas tarpaulin to spread on the ground before you roll in your blanket for the night. Have the tarp big enough to fold over you, and in windy weather, or camping in a place exposed to drifting sand pull the tarp right over your head before you go to sleep, so that should a sandstorm blow up during the night, you won't be smothered to death.

Don't get lost. Don't even take a chance on getting lost; but if you should, try to keep from getting panicky. The first thing to do, once you have satisfied yourself that you are actually lost, is to get out of the sun. Sit or lie down with your head in whatever shade you can find—the shade of a rock, of a clump of greasewoods or anything else that offers shelter. Then study the situation as calmly as possible. Remember that if there are others in the party—and, as mentioned a few paragraphs above, there should be—they will soon miss you and start hunting for you.

If there is a high spot, or rise in the desert slope nearby, go to it. In mountain country get up onto a saddle or divide between canyons, don't stay down on the winding canyon floor. Next, build a brush fire out of anything that will burn, greasewood, dried roots, dead cactus, et cetera. Your partners will see the smoke in the daytime, the blaze of the fire at night.

However, if you are alone, or if you must start out yourself, travel only during the cooler portions of the day, or at night. Keep track of the direction and distance you travel, at least roughly. Count your steps, two thousand to the mile. The path of the sun, by day, and the North Star at night will, if you have no compass, afford you a general direction indication.

Then head for the nearest road, railroad, settlement, mine, or such like concerning the location of which you have some definite idea, and keep going. Don't wander around purposelessly. Keep up your courage.

The desert may be hard and harsh at times, but she's a pretty nice old gal once you get to understand her.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

This week we have a letter from another grateful pal who has this to say: "I want to thank you for the kind words expressed in my favor when my letter was published and must add that through your kindness, I located an old friend of dad's whose letters are so nice and full of memories of many people in our little home town. I would also like you to publish this and help me. Some time ago I received a card addressed to me and signed 'A Friend of the Hollow Tree.' The pal who wrote it was an ex-nurse residing in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Unfortunately, the postmark was stamped over her name and it was impossible to read it. I took a guess and mailed my letter to Mrs. Ruby Baker, but it came back unclaimed. So if she should see this, I wish she'd write to me again. Best wishes of the season."—Marguerite Esperance.

Cheer up this deserving pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

While lying here in bed at the Station Hospital, feeling lonely and blue, I happened upon the Hollow Tree pages in Western Story Magazine. Your department seemed to be trying to cheer up lonely people, so I thought I'd ask you if you would be kind enough to publish a plea for me. I have been here for sixteen months and am about to undergo my sixth operation. I have plenty of time to answer all letters and would like pals from all over the world. I'll be watching the mails.—Francis J. Gilmore, Station Hospital, Fort Banks, Massachusetts

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Jane likes airplanes—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope you'll find a small space in which to print my request for Pen Pals. I am eighteen years old and at the present time am going to the University of California. I enjoy all sports, like to travel, especially in airplanes, and enjoy reading. I can tell all who are interested a great many interesting things about California, so, boys and girls, write to me. I promise to answer all letters and want to hear from all of you.—Jane Gaines, 121 Aragon Boulevard, San Mateo, California

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Match collectors write to this Aussie—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would be pleased to have my name inserted in your column. We receive Western Story about a year after it is published, but the stories are just as enjoyable and interesting with age. I collect match labels and would like some American interested in the same hobby to write to me.—A. Jenkins, 16 Albert Street, Sebastopol, Victoria, Australia

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This plea is from Missouri—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and work in a grocery store in St. Louis. I like to write letters, so I'm asking Pen Pals through the Hollow Tree. I collect post cards, stamps and snapshots of friends. I certainly enjoy writing letters, so here's hoping a lot of you boys and girls will hear my plea and write to me. I will exchange snapshots.—Marion Smith, 4547 Fair Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri

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Hudson likes to get places fast—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-three years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from everywhere. I enjoy most everything, especially motorcycling. I have a new one and do a lot of traveling on it. I will exchange snaps with all who want to.—Hudson Bicknell, Marbury, Maryland

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Calling folks who live on ranches—

Dear Miss Rivers:

My girl friend and myself are both very fond of writing letters and although we have a few Pen Pals, we would like a lot more. We are both seventeen years old and enjoy bicycle riding, reading, writing letters and collecting stamps and are both stanch supporters of our Okato football teams. We would like pals between seventeen and twenty years of age living on ranches in the United States or anywhere

else in the world. We are very fond of cowboy songs which we play on our victrolas. We will answer all letters and try to make them interesting, so let's hear from you.—Cora Andrews and Margaret Callensen, "Riversleigh," Okato, Taranaki, New Zealand

Hear all about this sailor's travels—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailor in the United States navy and an enthusiastic reader of your magazine and especially the Hollow Tree department. I am twenty-one years old, have traveled far and wide, and can tell of some very interesting places I have visited. I would be only too glad to answer any questions about my experiences while traveling. I prefer pals between eighteen and twenty-four years of age and promise to answer all letters, so here's your chance to get acquainted with a true-blue sailor from Uncle Sam's mightiest force.—William Morrison, Jr., U. S. S. *Aylwin*, Navy Yard, Mare Island, California

Betty can play the bagpipes—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old Scotch-Canadian girl who is very anxious to have some Pen Pals. I love swimming, tennis and dancing, which I teach. I also play the bagpipes. I would like to hear from pals all over the world. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots and post cards, so, boys and girls, don't disappoint me.—Betty Pringle, 2807 Cambridge Street, Vancouver, B. C., Canada

Answer this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Many thanks to your swell magazine for some happy hours spent reading it while in bed here at this sanitarium. I have been a patient here for about five years, but am up and around now a good deal of the time and would very much like to join your Hollow Tree gang. Won't you help me find some Pen Pals by sending out my call?—Bernie Golden, U. S. Veterans Hospital, Castle Point, New York

Welcome to Martha and Edna from Alaska—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We have been faithful readers of Western Story Magazine for two years and would appreciate it very much if you'd publish this request for Pen Pals. The gold-mining town in which we live has only sixty inhabitants, so we often get very lonely. Besides, we only get mail twice a month. Martha is fourteen years old, and I am eighteen. We promise to answer all letters and no fooling about it. We'll also exchange snapshots and tell you all about Alaska. Here's hoping we receive letters from north, south, east and west.—Martha Jorgensen and Edna Swanson, Haycock, Alaska

He'll tell you all about Hawaii—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a regular reader of Western Story Magazine and would very much like to become a member of the Hollow Tree. I am a lonely Irishman in the United States army and can tell you a lot about Hawaii and New York City. I promise to answer all letters and would like to hear from everyone, from anywhere. I will send a souvenir to the first five who answer and will exchange snapshots with everyone.—Private R. McCaffrey, Company F, 19th Infantry, Schofield Barracks, Oahu, T. H.

Gracie will be a true pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I'd love an avalanche of letters. I am eighteen years old and will be a true pal if there ever was one. I enjoy dancing, singing and riding horseback. I'd like to hear from boys and girls between eighteen and twenty-six years of age.—Gracie Payne, Angola, Louisiana

A-hunting, Melvin wants to go—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man eighteen years old and am looking for a pardner to trap and hunt with during the winter months. I would like to hunt and trap in South or North Dakota and am pretty good at both, so if any of you men need a square-shooting pal, write to me pronto.—Melvin Frey, Rt. No. 3, Dallas, Georgia

Martha knows lots about ranch life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young woman twenty-eight years old and would like some correspondents around that age. I am a nurse and at present am working in a psychopathic hospital. Since I hail from Texas I know a lot about ranch life and rodeos. I enjoy dancing, swimming, horseback riding, and taking snapshots. I also play the guitar and sing. You cowboys and cowgirls, write to me, and also all others who want to. I love to write letters and I'll be your Pal.—Martha Gaskill, Rt. No. 1, Box 47, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Letters are his only contact with the outside world—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I shall be grateful to you if you will kindly insert my letter in your Hollow Tree. I am eighteen years old and live on one of the tropical islands off the coast of Malaya. Corresponding is my only means of getting in touch with the outside world, and I would appreciate letters from Hawaii, other Pacific islands, the West Indies, and other parts of the world, except the United States, England and Canada.—H. T. Chee, 102 Burmah Road, Penang, Malaya

Mab doesn't like the long winter months—

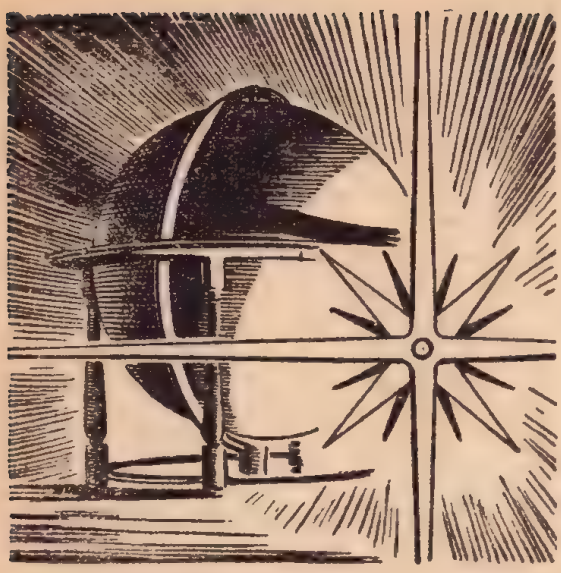
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a nineteen-year-old girl and would like some Pen Pals from anyone who finds the winter months long and lonely too. In the summer I travel a lot and sure don't like not having anywhere to go now. I enjoy rodeos and have my own car, so I can get to quite a few of them in Montana and Alberta. I also like riding, hunting and dancing. I've more than enough time to write and will exchange snapshots.—Mab Boorman, Shelby, Montana

Bill is a CCC boy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely CCC boy in the wilds of northern Michigan. Football and boxing are my favorite sports, and collecting photos is my hobby. I am eighteen years old and will exchange snapshots, so come one, come all, and write to me.—Bill Bradish, CCC Company 3632, Camp Lake Superior, Newberry, Michigan



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

The North Pacific Coast country is attracting more people every day, and there is good reason for it. The Northwest as a whole is going through a period of expansion now which will last for years, and which, before it is over, will make that section one of the most important in the whole country.

It has as much, in the way of natural resources, as any other section of the country has. Besides that, the Federal and State governments are spending millions of dollars for such permanent improvements as the vast irrigation projects which harness great rivers and make them work for the enrichment of the people, great highways and bridges which will open the wide farming districts and make them accessible to markets for their products.

In short, there are any number of reasons why that country offers such attractions to the person looking for a home in a new country, but with the assurance that his efforts will bring him a good return for his labors.

It was a discussion of these reasons that led Frank D., of Des Moines, Iowa, to write: "For a number of reasons, none of them involving any disloyalty to my present section of the country, I want to find a new location. I have heard so much about the opening up of the Pacific Northwest that I'm ready to head up there, bag and baggage, on your say-so, if you think the country is all it is reported to be. However, I wish you would kindly tell me something of the coast region up there, something as to crops, climate, et cetera, and suggest a likely location."

In answer to this, I should first like to repeat the caution that any honest adviser would give, and that is, go and look over the land before you buy. Never buy a farm or acreage without a full investigation and a personal inspection of the exact piece of property which interests you.

As for the Northwest Coast, perhaps one of its greatest attractions is its mild and pleasant climate which has no extreme of temperature in summer or winter, due to the stability of the Japan Current which flows along the coast. This climate

If others who are interested in a new pioneering country and want to get "back to the land" will write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, he will tell them how they can get illustrated descriptive literature about this Northwest country.

affords the farmer the opportunity to raise a particularly wide variety of crops.

Along the cost, poultry and dairy farming are the leaders, while a large number of people do general farming, and others specialize in such specialized crops as berries, flowers, bulbs, cranberries, walnuts and filberts; vegetable specialties and tree fruits.

Much of the produce from this thriving section goes to market in its fresh state, supplying the fast-growing cities and towns of the Northwest, and being shipped back inland and to less-favored communities. Still more of it, and an important part to the farmer, is that which is processed right on the farm, either canned or dried.

The importance of these canning and preserving factories right on the ground is great because it means that the farmer will not have any part of his crop left unsold after he has done the work of raising it. It stabilizes his income and takes much of the gamble out of farming, a serious factor in places where his income is governed entirely by local supply and demand.

Now, to dig up the secret of where the settler's great opportunity for profit lies, we must bear in mind that much of the land in the Northwest was timbered and used only for cutting lumber. When the lumberman is through he leaves some mighty rich land. But it is covered with stumps, and it is not any good for farming until the stumps are removed. It can usually be bought and cleared very cheaply. This cut-over land is the outstanding opportunity for the young man of today who wants to get started on a home of his own.

In this same general section, just over the Cascade Mountains, there is another type of land which offers great opportunities. But it will appeal more to the man who has already earned his working capital by farming, and is looking for a place where his experience and his capital will bring him still greater returns.

This is the land which is being opened up in the irrigation projects about which I have spoken. It is here that those who have the means to avail themselves of the new land will find great success.

Briefly, the story of this section is that the land has been lying dry for ages, accumulating humus and richness, but not having enough water to make vegetation thrive. With water, it has everything that any other land has, and more than most.

Just east of the Cascades, then, in the State of Washington, lies the Upper Yakima or the Kittitas Valley, a division of the Yakima irrigation project. From the Kittitas on down the Yakima River to Kennewick in the Lower Valley is a succession of communities where the farms are blooming under irrigation, and where a man may make a fine living on as little as five or ten acres of land.

• We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

TENDERFOOT STAMPEDE

BY W. D. HOFFMAN

On foot the Kid and Holbrook Jack had little chance against the killers.

DUST billowed up in feathery plumes from the plodding hoofs of the cattle, settling down in a gray powdery cover on their gaunted backs as the Texas herd pushed northwest over the New Mexico line. Back along the left flank a saddle-sore tenderfoot stuck to his place in the drive, fighting his aching muscles, heat-burned eyes and thirst-raw throat.

Black-browed Tonk Beemis, drive boss, rode back from point. "How yuh doin', Swamper?" he asked.

The tenderfoot snorted, gagged. "Who, me? Say, this is a cinch. I hesitates to take the money."

"Got a stretcher in the wagon," Beemis offered.

"Needin' it yourself, boss?"

"Set tight, younker. Yo'll larn cowpunchin' yit."

"Say, boss, take a look!" The Swamper Kid pointed to the distant skyline, where rippling heat waves merged with the brassy heavens. "Riders! We'll be havin' company."

Tonk Beemis forced back a stiff-lipped grin. He was a heavy man of forty, hard on a horse and hard on his men. Saddle rookies were his meat. He prided himself on a vein of humor often impish with cruelty. A glance at the throbbing horizon told him the Kid had seen a mirage, nothing more.

"Them's trail wolves, Swamper," he drawled.

"Oh, yeah?" the Kid said, suspiciously.

"Two-legged 'uns," Beemis added soberly. "Rustlers. They jumps cattle for a livin'." Lashing his quirt, he spurted away toward the drags.

The Kid swiped the sweat from his stubby nose, wondering. He didn't know whether he was scared or glad of a chance to mix in a rustler fight. Anyway, it would be something to tell old Tobey, back in Golden.

The red-headed mine-camp waif had pitched in to help the cook and the wrangler, but he had been allowed to ride now that the herd was leg-weary and quiet. He was feeling chesty now, flanking with a crew of hard-riding Texans on the big Bradford Bar Seven herd. Old Tobey ought to see his kid roommate now.

SWAMPER winced, trying to sit gingerly on that hard saddle. His young skin burned like fire; his leg muscles and galled thighs hurt him cruelly. But he tightened his lips at thought of the hundred in wages he'd draw at Roundtop. That money would enable Tobey to grubstake himself for another six months at the mine.

The old hardrocker, broke and discouraged, would be fussing around back there wondering what had happened to Swamper. Right when a rich strike seemed sure, their money had played out. The Kid hadn't had a chance to tell Tobey of the lucky break he'd got, to throw in with a trail herd. Soon, though, he'd send the hundred and that would enable his partner to blast into the gold vein.

Rustlers? Bah. Swamper touched the heavy .45 at his side. Tonk Beemis had even given him a gun. Its jogging against his leg had rubbed a spot of soreness, and the times when he had discharged it his fingers had cramped and the kick had startled him. But he'd learn.

The Bradford Bar Seven moved onto Dry Thirty Desert the sixth day out. Here Holbrook Jack Ward, buyer of the herd, met the drive and took delivery with the understanding that the eight Texas drovers under Tonk Beemis would continue as trail crew across the desert. The Roundtop cattleman brought only two riders with him.

"See yuh got another tenderfoot along," Holbrook Jack said to Tonk Beemis that afternoon, glancing back at the Kid. "I never see a Texas crew that don't tote along a goat. Won't you fellers ever grow up?"

Beemis chuckled throatily, flipping his quirted hand ahead, where rose the hazy shape of Cabezon Butte—Big Old Head. "Old Spanish custom. Hands has just got to play hoss passin' the Cabezon, seems like. The same as sailors crossin' the Equator."

"Some day you fool Texicans is gonna kill one o' them tenderfoots, monkeyin' thataway," the cattleman remarked.

Beemis' thick brows tilted wickedly. "You done it plenty in yore time, didn't yuh?" he growled.

"Never did spook a tenderfoot on no desert like this," declared the rancher.

"They always light out south from the Cabezon, where there's water."

"Kid says yuh offered him big pay," Holbrook Jack remarked.

"A hundred at Roundtop." Beemis laughed heartily. "Could of made it five hundred."

Holbrook glanced back at the intended victim of the old Texas hoax. "He's a salty kid. I taken a likin' to him. Hate to see him stampeded out of his wages."

"Hell, you know a bum like him ain't worth twenty an' found. An' look at all the experience he's gonna corral. A trail-herd waddy. Anyhow, it ain't possible to keep a crew

like these Texicans in the saddle in this blasted country without they have their fun. They're countin' on it. We got a box of blanks."

"Blanks, eh?" Holbrook Jack said crustily.

"Yep. Yore tenderfoot friend won't git hurt none."

TOWARD sundown the Swamper Kid saw Tonk Beemis shade his dusky eyes from the sun's glare and curse. "Nary doubt it's the rustlers," he muttered, riding past the tenderfoot with Lanky Jim.

The Kid watched Beemis cross an arroyo and look carefully at the ground. On his return Beemis' heavy features held a scowl. "More wolf sign. Put an extry man on the wagon tonight, Jim."

Lanky Jim, a stony-eyed segundo, told the Kid to sleep with the cook in the wagon that night. "Case yuh hear riders, howl out," the Texan told him.

"Not joshin' a feller, are yuh?" the Kid grinned.

"Wish to hell I was," Lanky Jim said, gloomily.

When camp was made at Last Water and the Kid turned his horse into the rope corral, he stood watching one of the Texans fighting a bucking horse. The puncher was a flat-nosed mixed-blood called Tejano. He was tearing the pony's mouth viciously with a Spanish bit and ripping its flanks with big-roweled spurs. Thick blood streamed down the animal's legs.

Cursing and grimacing by turns, Tejano thumped the bronco between the ears, sent him jumping, then pounded his head with his shot-loaded quirt. Suddenly he threw his lean legs to the animal's shoulders and dug in with the spurs, slashing the horse unmercifully and laying open the hide in long gutters. The gory exhibition made the Kid grit his teeth.

The Kid ran up to him. "Hey, you monkey!" he blurted. "Cut that out!"

Tejano turned, fiery eyes wide with astonishment. He let go of the rein and walked slowly toward the tenderfoot. His quirt darted out, whistling. The lash caught the Kid across the jaw and neck, stinging like a slashing bowie.

Hot rage seized the Kid. He sprang at the half-breed, fists balled. Tejano's gun flicked out, covering him.

"Go way," the puncher warned. "I kill you!"

Choking with anger, the Kid backed away. Holbrook Jack Ward was just passing. "Calm down, son. Don't horn in thataway," he cautioned. "For yore own good."

The Kid licked his lips, a quiet, deadly hate boiling in him. His fingers came away red when he felt the cut across his neck. A few minutes later Tejano dragged by him, spurs clanking. Swiftly the Kid reached out for the gun in the man's holster, flung it into the sand.

He jerked out his own weapon, dropped it, and waded in. Tejano spun around, his eyes wicked. Both men struck. The slim, long-armed tenderfoot planted a blow against the breed's mouth that sent him back a step, spitting. They rushed in together, clinched and tore at each other's faces while the crowd of Texans gathering around hooted in glee. Suddenly the Kid saw a long slender knife flashing above his head and heard Holbrook Jack yell a warning.

As the blade plunged down, the Kid's fingers caught Tejano's wrist, shoving the steel aside within an inch of his face. Quickly the breed twisted the knife inward toward the tenderfoot's chest, point forward.

Swinging with his right, the Kid smashed his fist to the side of the ear and sent Tejano staggering on unsteady legs. He followed it up with a rush, kicked the knife from the other's hand and piled on top of him. He was planting fist after fist into the breed's face when Tonk Beemis caught his collar and dragged him off.

"Pick up them hardware, Jim," the Texas ramrod barked, as the battered Tejano swayed to his feet, teeth flashing like coyote fangs under his crimson, mashed lips. Beemis jerked the Kid around, glared into his sweated, dirt-grimed face. "Of all the blasted shorthorns that ever come up the trail!" he growled. He gave the Kid a shove. "Lend a hand to the cook, you! Any more fightin' yo're fired!"

Cautious chuckles reached the Kid's ears. "Yo're right, boss," someone said. "Got to protect yore men agin' tenderfeet like Swamper." The Kid sensed the crowd was with him. But the disarmed Tejano stood off by the roped cavvy watching him with slitted, murderous eyes.

While the Kid was digging the cook's fire trench, Holbrook Jack paused beside him. "Son, you better drift," he warned, lighting a cigarette. "That feller will shore kill yuh. I'll leave one o' my Double Di'mond hosses saddled near the wagon. Take him durin' the night an' light out south."

The Kid shrugged. "If anybody's leavin', it's him, mister," he said.

"Yuh don't savvy things, son. That feller is a killer." The Roundtop buyer coughed, waited till the cook had passed. "It's yore only chance."

"I need the hundred too bad," the Kid declared with a hard grin.

"Me, I'm short o' cash, but write me to Roundtop an' I'll send the money wherever you say. Jest drift, son, tonight."

"Without workin' for it? Nix. But I thank yuh, mister."

With a worried look, Holbrook Jack passed on as the cook ordered Swamper to rustle up firewood.

TONK BEEMIS, Lanky Jim and three other Texans drew their mounts together beside the cattle at the waterhole. "I'm layin' five to one that Swamper Kid won't spook," Sleepy Steve declared.

"Be the first that didn't," Beemis grunted. "Wait till he sees the slaughter."

"Got sand, that lad has," Sleepy insisted. "Me, I'd ruther forgit it. Take a tally, boss, an' I reckon it'll show the boys don't have no stummick for it. He's different from them bums we us'ally picks up off the railroad."

Scowling, Tonk Beemis exchanged a glance with Lanky Jim. "No!" the drive boss muttered. "Tejano would kill him anyhow. Me, I had trouble coaxin' the breed to lay off till tomorrer night. Kid's lucky we're hazin' him clean out o' Tejano's reach."

"Mebbe so." Reluctantly, the others agreed it might be for the tenderfoot's own good to pull the show as planned.

Holbrook Jack Ward jogged up to the knot of riders. "Yore shindig is peterin' out, ain't it?" he asked Beemis.

"How come?"

"My riders won't go in on it. If I know cowpunchers, yore Texicans won't neither—not with a salty kid like Swamper."

Tonk Beemis leaned forward in the saddle. "Listen, Holbrook. Yuh don't want Tejano to kill the Kid,

do yuh? Nobody does. That's why we figger to go through with it an' run him out of here."

The Roundtop cattleman sat stiff in the saddle, his brows forked in deep thought. "You win, Beemis," he said slowly. "But count us Double Di'monds out."

"*Bueno* with me, pardner," Beemis agreed blandly.

With supper over and the herd bedded down, the Texans sat around for a time smoking. Beemis sent two men out on first watch. Squatting by the fire, he said seriously:

"If they come, shoot to kill, boys."

He received glum nods from the Texans. They lacked their usual dry humor.

The Kid was dog-tired and sleepy, but Beemis' remark made him sit wakefully with the laggards after the others had rolled in.

"Me, I wrangled for that A Box outfit they massacreed last fall," Lanky Jim said conversationally.

"Oh, yeah?" said the tenderfoot.

"Uh-huh." And Lanky Jim went on to tell with relish the story of an imaginary rustlers' attack.

Tonk Beemis yawned, stretched. "Buried 'em close to the Rock, didn't they?" he asked.

"At the Cabezon," Lanky Jim drawled.

Out of the corners of their eyes the Texans were watching the Kid, satisfied he was impressed in spite of his bantering half grin.

"Bradford Brothers can't afford to lose these cattle, or Holbrook Jack either," Beemis stated grimly.

"Nor me them wages," the Swamper Kid put in. "Got a friend needin' that hundred bad."

"Time to turn in," the drive boss said, tramping out the glowing embers of the cook fire.

Next day saw more and more comments dropped about trail wolves. A brooding anxiety seemed

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to be upon the Texans, the Kid noted.

"If we git through the night, the worst'll be over," Tonk Beemis remarked in the hearing of the Kid. He went quietly among the drovers, handing out blank cartridges.

Dry camp was made on the opposite side of the granite monolith from the herd's bedground and the cavvy. It was the first time they had camped so far from the stock. The Kid wanted to ask why, but remembered Holbrook Jack's caution about questions.

SUPPER finished, Beemis gave mock orders for defense of the herd, sending four men out on guard. He covered the fire, posted Lanky Jim as camp sentry, and told the others to roll in.

Picking up his soogan, the tenderfoot took a step toward the wagon. He stopped, stiff-lipped, at sight of Tejano standing behind the chuck box, a motionless, low-crouched figure in the starlight.

The Kid swung around to Beemis. "Gimme my gun," he said. "I got a hundred-dollar stake in this deal."

"Hell, you couldn't hit a wagon sheet," the drive boss grunted. "Ain't askin' you to do no fightin'."

"You gave Tejano his," argued the Kid.

"He's the best shot in the outfit. Go to bed."

"If that monkey starts anything—"

"He won't," snarled Beemis. "Come here, Tejano!" He caught the Kid's arm. "Yo're a heap safer without a gun. Sabe?"

The breed moved toward the drive boss, and the Swamper Kid walked past him to the wagon. Breathing heavily, he climbed in beside the Mexican cook.

Battling his fatigue to remain awake, the Kid lay so he could look over the edge of the wagon bed. He watched Tejano settle down among the other huddled sleepers on the ground. All grew still save for the faint sounds of night-stirring horses in the distance, the low moan of thirst-tortured cattle, the ever present coyote chorus from afar. After a while his head drooped. He sank back asleep.

A rush of hoofs jerked him upright in the middle of the night. He jammed his fists into his eyes, stared toward the sound and saw shadowy figures flitting around the great rock on the side nearest the herd.

"Wake up!" he hollered. "The rustlers!"

He was tugging on a boot when a terrific crash of gunfire coming from the butte burst on his ears. Drovers leaped up from their spreads near the wagon. Nighthawk riders galloped around the other end of the great rock, their pistols coughing flame. When the Kid emerged from the wagon he beheld a scene of milling riders, blazing guns, heard the cursing Texans firing, afoot and in the saddle. Tonk Beemis' voice boomed behind the wagon. "Down 'em, waddies! Kill the sons!"

A gun barrel jerked upward almost in the Kid's face and he flopped back in the straw. The weapon flamed, roared, driving a slug through his heavy mat of red hair, stinging his scalp. He rolled, clutched outward desperately to grab the gun. He got the steel rod in his fingers, and wrenched it from the attacker's grip. He turned it, hammer up, and hooked the trigger, firing at the fleeing killer. It was Tejano, he knew now, from the cone-shaped sombrero the killer wore. The breed kept going, though he seemed to lurch a little.

Horses reared, snorted, riders

dropping from their saddles. Resting the big .45 on the wagon box, the Kid blazed away at the dark figures streaming from the attacking side of the butte, guns squirting thin funnels of flame. More dropped from their horses on both sides, their groans and yells punctuating the pistol blasts. The Mexican cook hid his face in the straw and blubbered in mock fright.

A rider swerved by the wagon, clutching the mane of his bronc as he slid downward. Two punchers on foot collapsed in quick succession. Another stumbled, pitched forward on his face as he sped for the cavvy corral. The Kid continued to fire carefully, surprised at his own coolness. Beyond the rock the howls of men and the heavy roar of guns had got the herd running, as told by the dull rumble of their hoofs. Horses snorted and raced around the roped corral. The Kid hopped from the wagon, his gun empty, and ran to a fallen puncher for more cartridges. He heard Tonk Beemis' panicky bellow:

"Ever'body for himself! They got us licked . . . stampeded the hosses an' the herd!"

The Kid dived beside the fallen drover, threaded out a handful of shells from the man's belt, and shoved the chambers full. Backing to the wagon, he crouched down, trying to decide which were the rustlers in that crazy mix-up. Two riders tore past him, bent around in the saddle and fired. Holding his gun in both hands, the tenderfoot poured all six charges at the pair, saw one drop, the other spring out of the saddle as his horse plunged on its side.

Three riders raced upon him, their weapons thundering. He rolled under the wagon, through to the other side, and shoved in his remaining cartridges. Through the spokes of the wheels he slanted his gun upward and kept it bucking until it was empty. Then he rose and sprinted for the rope corral.

To his dismay, he found the cavvy gone. Off in the darkness he heard Lanky Jim yelling: "Ketch that Kid! He's got Tejano's gun!"

RACING back, the Kid jumped one of the riderless horses near the edge of the camp, climbed into the saddle and dug his bootless heels into its flanks. He headed north toward the Big Dipper, his one purpose to get to Roundtop with news of the rustler raid.

A hot wind hissed in his ears, carrying the fainter crack of guns as he rode. His panicky horse tore over the desolate waste with reckless speed, forcing the Kid to hunt leather to stick. For a time he heard pursuing hoofbeats behind him, then they stopped. The rumble of the herd had died down. He could see nothing of the cattle or the stampeded cavvy.

The horse continued its mad gallop through chaparral, sand and cactus. Presently it began to wobble, panting and whistling. Suddenly its legs gave way and it crumpled to the ground. Kicking his sock feet from the stirrups, the Kid got free. He looked at the trembling, feebly struggling animal, saw in the starlight its torn, spur-ripped body. It was the bronc Tejano had bled white with spur and quirt.

Onward the Swamper Kid traveled afoot, through vast waste dotted with the eerie shapes of yucca and Spanish bayonet. Deep quartz sand dragged at his cotton socks. The burs of chollo pierced his feet, sharp needles of cactus stabbed through

his Levis. And, weighing him down, was the dull thought that he had failed old Tobey.

Daylight found him struggling on, his socks ragged on his feet. The sun rose hot and dazzling. He crossed rocky arroyos, barren flats, lizard-infested basins and lomas. Stumbling over the black, jagged root of a mesquite, he fell prone. Heart pumping, breath ripping in and out of tortured lungs, he fought himself up, pushed on. A sidewinder twisted at his feet, jackrabbits jumped ahead of him like miniature kangaroos. Thirst clutched his parched throat and his eyes stung with the salt of his sweating lids.

An awful well of silence enveloped him as he plodded over a dry alkali lake, snowy and bitter with spirals of dust. His feet were raw and burning, and gravel beds brought blood to his lacerated soles. The landscape swam and throbbed.

Swaying on exhausted legs, the Kid sank down under the meager shade of a screw-bean shrub. Through the blazing afternoon he remained there, face downward on his arms. When the sun dropped over the desert he dragged himself to sitting position, cut off the bottoms of his jeans, wrapped his lacerated feet and pushed on in the darkness.

Through the night he limped along, stumbling often, dragging his bleeding feet through thorny litter, sand, lava and rock. Needles of dryness stabbed his throat; he could not swallow. Thirst-maddened, he saw daylight come, and kept laboring onward.

Blazing noontide in the desert furnace saw him sink down beside a slab of rock in a dazed torpor, a thousand gun-mad rustler fiends at last forgotten.

TOM DEVER, railroad telegrapher, sat at the dusty table in his box-car office forwarding his night dispatch. Above the metallic click of his sending key he heard an unusual sound outside the door. He rose and looked out into the night.

A creeping, animallike object along the railroad track startled him. He stepped back, taking up his rifle. When he looked again he made out the form of a man crawling slowly on hands and knees. Taking up his lantern, he stepped out toward the water tank, and lifted the stricken man toward the siding office.

Shocked at the distorted, swollen face and half-naked body of the derelict, Dever eased him down on the floor and reached for the canteen hanging on the box-car office door. He poured the cooling liquid over the blistered face and into the swollen mouth.

He saw that the wanderer was young, eyes almost closed, lids puffed and scarlet, bare feet swollen into oversized chunks of raw meat incrusted with clotted blood. His torn cut-off pants hung in tatters. He was speechless, could make only a guttural sound, waving his arms feebly.

Working over the sufferer for half an hour, the telegrapher saw him make motions as though writing. When paper and pencil were given him, his shaking fingers made a jerky scrawl:

> Rustlers killed seven cowboys.
> Send posse.

Rushing back to his telegraph key, Tom Dever dot-dashed the message to the sheriff at Roundtop.

At 2:30 in the morning the Arizona Accommodation rolled into the desert tank stop carrying an extra stock car with eight saddled horses. Sheriff Jess Freeman and seven

armed deputies unloaded their mounts, and the train rumbled on in the night.

"Where's them rustlers?" the sheriff asked the telegraph operator. Tom Dever pointed to the pitiful object sitting in the darkened corner of the box car.

"This cowboy stumbled in here about ten o'clock. He's just recovered his voice a little. He told me rustlers busted into camp at Cabezon Butte and shot down the other cowboys right and left. He lit out and was a couple days traveling over the desert. Near died from thirst—"

The sheriff strode to the corner, his tall frame rocking back and forth as he glared at the Kid, his swollen, bloody feet, ragged pants and red-rimmed eyes.

"Damn it, another tenderfoot!" Wrathfully the sheriff turned, thrusting his gaunt face into the telegrapher's. "You ought to be canned for this," he said angrily. "Yo're as green as this pore, miserable bum. Bringing us out here for this! No train till afternoon—an' then no way to take the hosses back!" He turned in disgust at the riders crowded about the box-car door. "Light an' take it gentle, boys. Just that old Texas trick. Only this fool tenderfoot went the wrong way. An' we're stuck."

While the deputies swore, the Kid swayed to his feet and limped toward the sheriff. His voice was a rasping whisper. "A trick?" he choked. "But all them men were killed—"

"Killed?" hooted the sheriff. "They shot into the air, or mebbe used blank cartridges. Spooked you, like every other bum they pick up for that purpose. Played wolf to see you run."

"Played wolf?" cried the Kid, hoarsely. "Well, I done some killin', joke or not!"

"Had a gun, did yuh?" grunted

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the lawman. "Then they made shore it had blanks in it."

"Blanks, your eye. I grabbed Tejano's gun when he tried to kill me, and I used that gun on them raiders!"

The sheriff grabbed the Kid's arm, glared into his red-rimmed eyes. "Then there'll be hell to pay!" he said. "But I don't believe it. You'll go back with us an' we'll find out."

The Kid settled down again in the darkened corner. "Fooled me," he muttered to himself. "Done that to make me run without payin' me off!" The picture of old Tobey rose before him, hungry and discouraged—the money for his grubstake gone into thin air.

The disgusted possemen squatted down to a game of cards after ordering a message sent to Roundtop for a stock car for the horses. Taking pity on the Kid, Tom Dever brought him some cold beef and bread.

But for the pain of his swollen feet, the Kid was feeling better. He had wrapped his feet carefully in flour sacking supplied by Dever. Sliding closer to the box-car door, he waited his chance. When the sheriff and his deputies were absorbed in their game the Kid unhooked the telegrapher's canteen, dropped to the ground and limped out into the darkness.

He stumbled to the nearest horse and pulled himself into the saddle. As he rein-lashed the animal away he heard yells from the box car.

He forced the big horse steadily south, dodging chaparral and daggered growth, his bandaged feet out of the stirrups. He'd get those wages from Tonk Beemis. He'd suffered too much, worked too hard, to let that money go by default when old Tobey needed it so badly.

LEADEN dawn was on the eastern plain when the Kid veered at sight of a riderless horse on an arroyo rim. He pulled up, stared at the

figure of a man lying down in the deep gully. He let himself out of the saddle, limped down. Startled, he saw that the unhorsed rider was Holbrook Jack.

The Kid bent over the cattle buyer and found that he was still breathing. Feebly, Holbrook Jack stirred at his hail, tried to sit up. The tenderfoot climbed back to the borrowed horse, got the canteen and held it to the man's cracked lips. He tore off a piece of Halbrook Jack's shirt and bound up the bullet gash above his eyebrows.

"Swamper," panted the cattleman. "Thank God!"

"They shot you, too," the Kid said. "It wasn't a fake stampede, after all?"

"Tonk Beemis, the low-down double-crossers," muttered Holbrook Jack, rising on one elbow. "He made a dicker with the thieves . . . shot down his own Texicans. Him an' Lanky Jim an' Tejano. Killed my riders, too." His weak voice rose. "Made 'em all think it was a tenderfoot stampede. When they had their guns loaded with blanks they couldn't defend theirselves." He paused, the breath jerking from his lungs. "Shot me, too. I'd started to ride after yuh, son." His bloodshot eyes rolled. "Lost a lost o' blood an' fell outta the saddle here."

"You're all right, now. I'll get you back to the box car and the posse." The Kid placed his arms under the cattleman's shoulder.

"More water, son. I got to git some stren'th." Holbrook Jack lay back again. The Kid gave him a drink, sat down beside him.

"Yuh hear that?" The cattleman drew himself up. From the distance came a low thud of hoofs. The Kid climbed the arroyo bank, expecting to see the sheriff's men in pursuit of the missing horse. Instead, he beheld a long funnel of white dust, brown shapes of cattle and riders.

"It's the rustlers!" he called out.

"Reckon so. Tonk Beemis runnin' my cattle to the Reservation," Holbrook Jack said huskily. "He'p me up to the edge o' that cutbank, son."

Lying prone, the mine-camp waif and the Roundtop veteran poured shot after shot at the thieves as the Bradford herd passed along the plateau. Tonk Beemis rushed his confederates toward the scene of the attack, his pistol blazing. The cattle began to fan out and the cavvy danced nervously off the trail.

"I'm gittin' Beemis, son," Holbrook Jack gritted. Three of the rustlers toppled from their saddles in that charge. Tonk Beemis, Lanky Jim and the others swerved. Now the Kid beheld a familiar figure rounding the herd, his swarthy face tigerish but puzzled.

"If it's that tenderfoot, leave him to me, Tonk," Tejano yelled.

"Couldn't be him, shootin' thataway—" Tonk Beemis' words died in his throat as he received a slug in the chest from Holbrook Jack's gun. His blocky face overspread with amazement, and he went backward, dragging from his panicky horse with one foot stuck in the stirrup.

Tejano came on at a hard gallop, his gun uplifted and roaring. His weapon reloaded with Holbrook Jack's cartridges, the Kid sat tight, taking the gun barrel in his left hand to steady it as he triggered. With the gun in front of his face the tenderfoot took careful aim at the killer. But suddenly Holbrook Jack grabbed him, pulled him back. "Down, son! They're comin' behind us!"

HORSES dashed up the arroyo, under the two battlers. Turning, the Kid saw Sheriff Jess Freeman and his deputies. "There's that tenderfoot hoss thief!" the lawman bellowed. "There's somebody with him! Throw down them guns, you two!"

At that instant the rustlers hove into view over the arroyo rim, Tejano in the lead. The Kid rolled, gripping his gun, turned it upward as the breed aimed at him.

The Kid fired, both eyes wide open behind the sights. Dimly he heard the astonished cry of the sheriff: "That's Breed Martinez!" Tejano's blazing gun sagged suddenly. His murderous eyes held a stony stare, and his head sank. Slowly he slid from the saddle over the embankment, and landed at the feet of the Swamper Kid, dead.

Holbrook Jack was trying to stem the rustler tide at the rim when the sheriff and his deputies joined in, raking the outlaws. Lanky Jim threw up his hands as two more rustlers were hurled from their mounts.

Then, suddenly, it was all over. Sheriff Jess Freeman swung his riders up the embankment, muttering his astonishment. "Breed Martinez's gang! This tenderfoot buckin' the worst rustler outfit in the country!" At sight of the cattleman's face, under the head bandage, he rose in the stirrups, eyes bugged out. "Holbrook Jack! You with this hoss-thief kid buckin' them rustlers?" He emitted a loud yell. "Whose herd was that, anyhow? Not the cattle in that Texas hoax at the Cabezon?"

"My herd," Holbrook Jack affirmed, getting to his feet. "Swamper here outsmarted 'em."

"Him, eh? Well, I'll be spavined! Look after the herd, boys." The sheriff dismounted. "Tenderfoot guts," he said slowly, glancing at the Kid's rag-bound feet. "If it wasn't for him borrowin' my hoss, Holbrook, we wouldn't been here. That boy saved yore herd."

"Saved my life," the Roundtop rancher declared. He laid a hand on the Kid's shoulder, steadying himself. "This lad's feet is a mite tender, but if he's a tenderfoot, then my Double Di'mond is needin' such. He downed more'n one rustler at the Cabezon, tracked clear over that desert to fetch help, an' topped it off by drillin' Tejano."

"What yuh got to say for yoreself, tenderfoot?" the sheriff asked.

The Kid grinned, but his voice was glum. "Tonk Beemis jiggered me outta the hundred bucks I was countin' on to help old Tobey grubstake his claim. Now I reckon Beemis can't pay me, bein' dead."

"Hundred?" grunted Holbrook Jack. "For savin' two thousand head of cattle an' the owner's life! You got a lot more'n a hundred bucks comin' to you. I got business with you, son, at Roundtop."

"Wait a minute," put in the sheriff. "How about the thousand reward for Breed Martinez? Yore bullet got him, tenderfoot." He motioned to the jackknifed form lying in the arroyo.

"Him?" cried Swamper. "That's Tejano."

"Breed Martinez in this country," the sheriff drawled. "Joined that herd to steal it, nary doubt. Feller, I could use yore kind of a tenderfoot as deputy in case—"

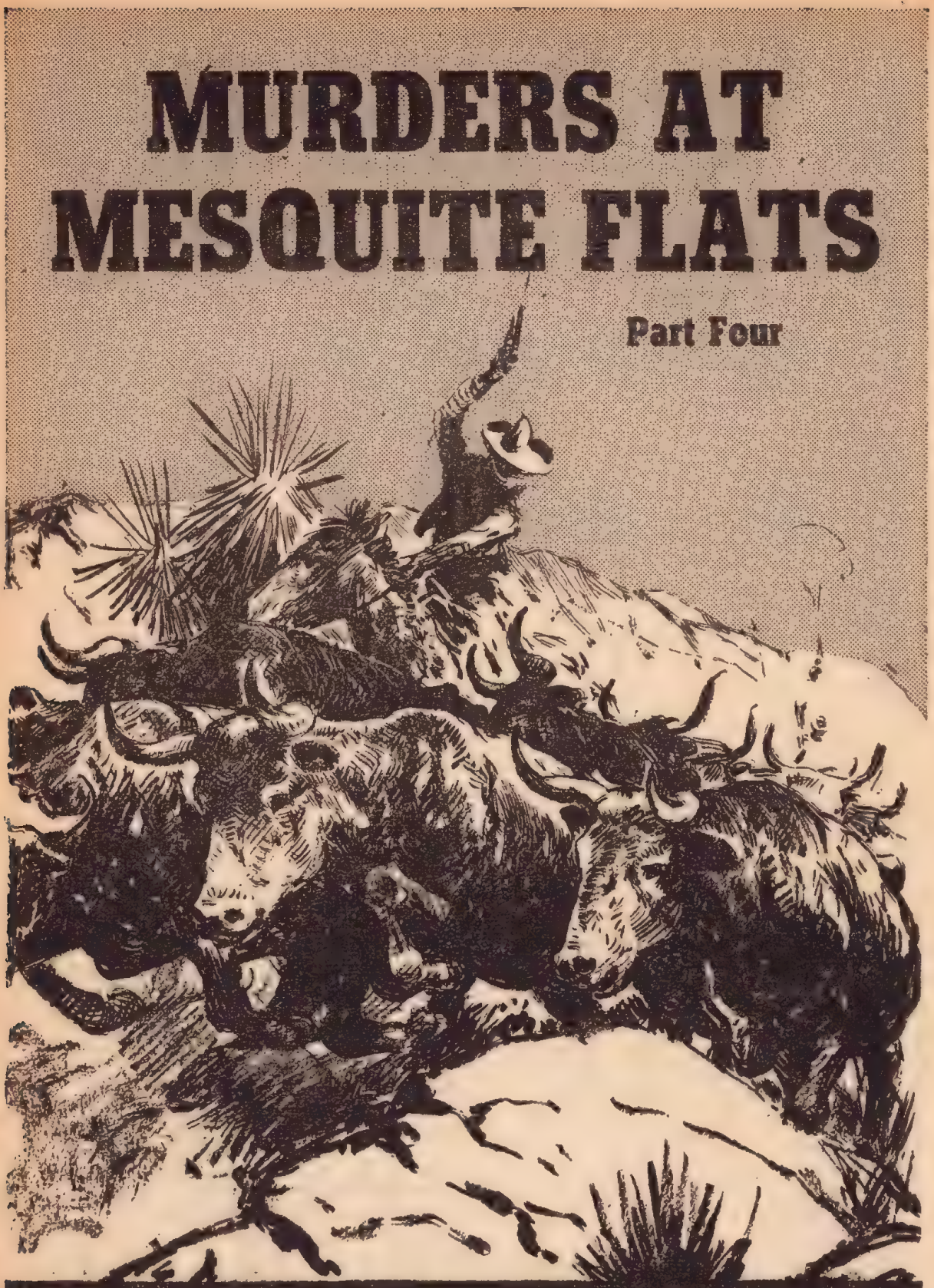
"Swamper's signin' on the Double Di'mond," Holbrook Jack interrupted. "Ain't yuh, son? You come along with me an' telegraph back all the money yore friend Tobey needs."

And the Kid admitted he still wanted to be a cowboy.

THE END.

MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS

Part Four



by STUART HARDY

The Story So Far:

Mrs. Katherine Lenroot, who owns the only sheep ranch in the country around Mesquite Flats and whose husband, Nevada Bill Lenroot, had been lynched a year before by a group of unidentified cattlemen, is informed by Soapy Dolan, a cowman, that he intends to bring cattle into the valley which she uses as winter range, a measure tantamount to forcing her out.

Sam Squam, Mrs. Lenroot's foreman, decides to try to enlist the aid of other cattlemen against Dolan. Before he can speak to any of them, however, Mesquite Flats is involved in a murder mystery. The bodies of three cattlemen, Ab Krassel, Cal Gordon and Skinny Jim Bale are found, all shot in the back. Around the neck of each man is a noose with a slip of paper attached reading, "Remember Lenroot?"

Neither Sheriff Ingersol, who is investigating the case, nor Len Foster, of the Border Patrol, who is assisting him, make any headway. Sam Squam does some investigating on his own and comes to the conclusions that Gail Duke, a newcomer in Mesquite Flats, can shed some light on the mystery.

Mrs. Lenroot reveals that Gail is her stepdaughter, Ruth Lenroot, and tells Sam that Nevada Bill also had a son who left home years before. Ruth, she believes, has come to Mesquite Flats because her brother intended to revenge their father's death.

Sam also learns that Hopi Painter, a blind man, is extorting money from some unknown person. Before he can find out who that person is, however, Painter is murdered and an attempt is also made at Sam's life.

While Sam is at the sheep ranch, trying to figure out his next move, Soapy Dolan's herd, driven by Slop Jeffers, arrives, a month before it was expected. The Lenroot crew, Sam and two other riders, prepare to fight.

CHAPTER XVIII

GRASS WAR

By the time Demijohn, Abe Stutz, and Mrs. Lenroot galloped back to join Sam, the storm that had been threatening all day had finally struck, as if the weather itself were expressing indignation against this invasion. But though heavy rain pelted down and flashes of lightning cut across the sky every few seconds, Sam stood grim and unmoving, his thumbs in his gun belt, watching the herd which was hardly a hundred yards below the valley.

The other two sheepmen, dismounting, ran to stand at either side of Sam. There was anger in their faces, and dogged determination, too. Despite the heavy odds against them, they showed no fear.

"Those aren't Bar V Bar riders, down there," Mrs. Lenroot suddenly exclaimed. "They're Mexicans!"

"Yeah," Sam said angrily. "I noticed that some time back. Slop is the only regular Bar V Bar hombre among 'em." And he added, "Reckon Dolan couldn't count on local rannies to come up here an' fight a woman. So he went across the Border an' hired himself some Mex killers!"

Mrs. Lenroot stood white with outrage. You could feel it seething in her. She saw that both Demijohn and Abe, like Sam, kept their hands close to their holsters. She herself was wearing a small Colt, one she had never had occasion to use, save against rattlesnakes and tarantulas. But she didn't touch it.

Fifty yards below the valley's entrance, Slop Jeffers lifted his arm and brought the drive to a halt. A few men grouped themselves behind him, and presently Slop himself, after a low-voiced discussion with the others, came forward.

"Mrs. Lenroot," he yelled, "we're callin' on you to get out o' the way! We're headin' for open range!"

Instead of replying, she flung back sharply, "Where's your boss?"

"I'm bossin' this herd!"

"Where's Soapy Dolan?" she insisted.

"He'll be along by an' by. Meanwhile—"

"I see." Mrs. Lenroot's voice trembled with anger. "Dolan stays away till the fightin's over. Then he can tell the Cattlemen's Association his riders took things into their own hands. He won't be responsible. It's exactly what I'd expect of him!"

Slop grinned without humor. Steadying his horse, he said, "That's neither here nor there, ma'am. Point is, I hanker to avoid fightin'. There wouldn't be any sense to it, fifteen of us against you four. You see that, don't you?"

"What are you expecting us to do? Turn our ranch over to you?"

"Just step aside an' let the herd through peaceable. We'll push right across to open range without botherin' you any."

"You know what I told Dolan about bringing two hundred head up here! It means he's driving me out!"

Slop's manner did not change. "Sorry, ma'm. I got orders to get this herd on open range."

For the first time Sam Squam spoke—quietly but with emphasis.

"Jeffers," he said, "when you try to cross this spread you'll be guilty o' trespass. We got a right to hold you off. An' we aim to do it!"

"Yeah?" Slop drawled. "How?"

"Any way we can. If you make us fight, we'll fight."

"Four against fifteen?"

"Four against fifteen thousand, if necessary—as long as we're in the right!"

For a moment Slop Jeffers studied him: studied the two men at Sam's sides. Then he shrugged.

"Well," he said, "looks like you're plumb askin' for it."

Without awaitin' a reply, he turned his horse and loped back to the others. All were huddled to-

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gether now. Slop spoke in whispers that couldn't be heard at the valley's entrance. The very secrecy of the thing increased Mrs. Lenroot's anxiety.

"Do you think they . . . they'll charge us, Sam?"

"Maybe."

"We can't fight them like this!"

SAM glanced around, tight-lipped. There were no rocks or trees here to serve as shelter. True, on each side of the narrow pass the ground rose, and the rises might afford protection from bullets. On the other hand, to go behind them meant that the valley's entrance itself would be left open and unguarded for the herd to run through as it chose.

"If they come a-blazin'—" began Demijohn, every syllable hoarse with fury. He didn't finish. He couldn't, because Slop and his men suddenly resorted to unexpected tactics.

They galloped away! With the rain pelting down upon them, the whole group raced downhill.

"What in thunder!" stammered Abe Stutz.

Then he saw. The fifteen men, led by Slop, drew rein behind the herd. Down there they began to yell. They screamed like Comanches on the warpath and the streaks of lightning and heavy rain lent a touch of weirdness to the scene. Their guns came out and they started firing skyward. Their horses pushed uphill, against the cows. And soon the whole frightened herd came loping, milling, squealing toward the valley!

"They're stampedin' 'em in!" shouted Demijohn.

His six-gun was in his hand. Sam, too, had drawn. But as they stared, a sense of terrible helplessness overwhelmed them. They couldn't fire at cows.

The cattle were coming faster and

faster. Behind them fifteen men screeched and blazed away and prodded them forward. And there was no direction for the herd to run save into the valley.

"Look out!" roared Abe.

He was the first to race back, out of the herd's way. Mrs. Lenroot followed him in rising panic, moving backward, her terrified eyes on the cows. Sam and Demijohn, too, had to retreat. There was no help for it. You couldn't fight cattle. Yet Sam waited so long that he was almost trampled.

Twice he fired upward. He yelled, waved his sombrero. Still, one man couldn't pit himself against the charge of that whole frightened herd. One man couldn't beat back the terror inspired by fifteen.

The cows lunged on. They came pouring into the valley, churning up mud as they ran. Sam and the others were in a safe enough spot now, behind one of the rises. But their very helplessness as they watched the herd thunder by, left them maddened.

Then the whole herd was through the entrance. After them came the men. And the men were being led by a grinning, triumphant Slop Jeffers. Unlike the others, he had disdained to bind a bandanna around his face.

The sight of Slop's grin infuriated little Demijohn beyond all control. He sprang out of brush, gun in hand, and screamed, "You doggone yeller polecat! You—"

Slop, seeing the six-gun in Demijohn's grip, did not hesitate. He jerked his own weapon around and fired. But his horse was heaving under him, and he missed. The bullet tore up sod ten feet behind Demijohn.

The little man roared an oath. He, too, fired, his slug clicking on Slop's saddlehorn.

It looked, then, as if the battle had started in earnest. The Mexicans, shouting wildly, were coming to surround Slop Jeffers. Their guns were ready. They seemed prepared to annihilate the sheep ranchers with a single fusillade.

But Katherine Lenroot, white of face, raced out toward them. Her arms were raised. She had not drawn her gun. She ran until she stood in front of Demijohn, between her own men and the Mexicans.

"*Stop it!*" she cried. There was a terrible stridency of her voice. "Stop it, all of you!"

Nobody fired. Milling in confusion, the Mexicans scowled at her in wonder. So did Slop. Clearly they had no particular desire to blaze at a woman.

"This is crazy!" she flung out. "Go on through. I'm letting you through!"

"Don't!" Sam yelled in consternation. "Don't give in to these buzzards!"

"I've got to!" she drove back at him. "I'm not going to see you all butchered for . . . for—"

Sam's face was gray. "Mrs. Lenroot, we're willin' to fight!"

"I know it—and I won't allow it!" She waved to the Mexicans. "Go on! Get that herd over to open range! Go on, I tell you!"

Her surrender left them astounded. They looked at Slop for guidance; and he, as if he were witnessing a miracle, suddenly threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"You're a smart woman, Mrs. Lenroot!" he declared. Then he waved gayly to his men. "Come along, compadres! You heard her! The valley's ours!"

CHAPTER XIX

A DEAD FINGER WRITES

TEN minutes later, the herd and the men behind it were far across the valley. The freak summer storm had exhausted itself and the sun, about ready to set, was struggling to show itself for a few minutes, at least.

"Why did you do it?" Sam said savagely. "We should've fought those coyotes till—"

"Till you were all sprawling around dead," Mrs. Lenroot cut in bitterly. "You think that would have helped matters?"

"Leastwise, we wouldn't have had to kowtow to a buzzard like Slop Jeffers!"

"I know how you feel, Sam. But I wasn't going to stand by and see you three die because of my sheep. I . . . I'd rather give up anything than see that happen!"

"Mrs. Lenroot," Demijohn began in disgust, "we could've plugged Slop first, an' them Mexicans wouldn't have fought without a leader! They're prob'ly a pack o' yeller—"

She shook her head firmly. Her eyes were sad as she watched the distant herd pushing on toward open range. "My way is better."

Almost five minutes passed before Sam spoke in an abrupt tone. "You're a citizen and a taxpayer, and you've got a right to call on the law to protect your property! I'm ridin' into Mesquite Flats to get the sheriff. I'm calling on him to keep these trespassers off your land!"

"They'll be off it, over on open range, before the sheriff gets here," Mrs. Lenroot argued.

"Not if I know the ways of Soapy Dolan and Slop Jeffers! They'll hog as much of the land as they can! They'll crowd us off the grass!

He swung around, stalked off to get his palomino.

Demijohn turned to Katherine Lenroot. "I'll ride with him! He's got into trouble every time he's been alone! Better let me go an' see he stays out of it this time!"

So it was that the two of them galloped out of the valley, down the long trail to cattle country and Mesquite Flats. Again they took the short cut across the badlands; the route on which they had once found Cal Gordon dead; the route that would eventually carry them across Rance Crawford's range.

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Sam, "if we rode smack into Soapy Dolan."

"Think he'll be comin', do you?"

"Sure. A buzzard like him won't stay away from where he figures there's carcasses for him to feast on."

They crossed almost all of the badlands, however, without encountering anyone. In truth, they were within half a mile of the Crawford grass land before the thing happened which altered every plan they had made. It was the sound of a gunshot, coming from far to their left.

SAM drew rein with a jolt. His nerves snapped like the plucked strings of a guitar. He glanced in amazement at Demijohn, then stared across the expanse of badlands.

There was nobody to be seen anywhere.

"Gosh!" Demijohn whispered. His lips were suddenly dry, so dry that he had to lick them. "That . . . that was the way we heard Cal Gordon killed! Remember?"

To his surprise, Sam at once swung out of his saddle. He threw the reins over the branches of a yucca. His face was grim and dogged.

"Wh-what you figure to do?" cried Demijohn.

"Walk! Our horses stir up too much dust an' make noise. If we go on, we go on afoot, without warnin' anybody we're comin'. We may get a look-see at somehin' worth seein'!"

"But that shot sounded half a mile away!"

"We can make it in less'n ten minutes. Come on!"

So Demijohn, too, left his mount hitched to the yucca. Together, half running in their nervousness, the two men went silently across the badlands. They had to climb ridges, dip into ravines, and struggle over rocks. Nevertheless, they were making good progress, and there was little dust to apprise anyone of their approach.

They had gone more than a quarter of a mile when Demijohn blurted a husky, "Jumpin' cactus!" He seized Sam's arm. "Look!"

Sam jerked his head in the direction to which the small man pointed. Several hundred yards away, slowly riding a bay horse along the rim of a ridge, was a solitary, stocky man, bending over his saddlehorn to peer down into a hollow. At the sight of him both Sam and his partner instinctively dropped behind a boulder.

For the man was Soapy Dolan!

"Looks like you guessed right!" whispered Demijohn.

Sam didn't speak. Narrow-eyed, he watched Dolan disappear into the hollow. Then he straightened and started forward swiftly.

"Maybe we're steppin' into somethin'!" he muttered. "The shot came from just about where he's ridin'."

"When we meet up with him," declared Demijohn, "I'm pullin' iron 'fore we start talkin!"

They proceeded cautiously now, grasping at rocks to steady themselves. There was no sound to be-

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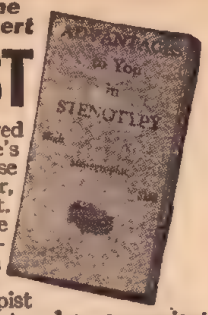

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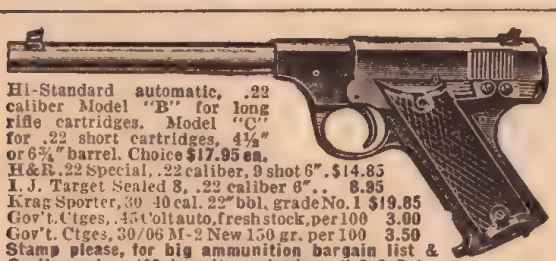

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tray their presence. Presently they could hear the hoofs of Soapy Dolan's horse. When they were close to the hollow into which Dolan had disappeared, both of them, on common impulse, drew six-guns.

They saw now, as they started up a slight rise, that the hollow was rimmed by a screen of brush. And that was good. It permitted them to sprawl on their chests and crawl to the very edge without being visible from below.

Dolan was still in the hollow; of that they were certain. He couldn't have emerged without being seen.

Inside Sam Squam a hammer seemed to be beating. It beat hard and fast, bringing perspiration out on his forehead. He squirmed forward like a huge lizard, with Demijohn emulating him hardly a yard away.

When they reached the screen of brush they found, to their relief, that it would not be necessary to push through it. There were plenty of spots, Sam discovered, where the growth was so sparse that it was easy enough to stare through it into the hollow. They look through and what they saw almost paralyzed them.

Sam actually stopped breathing. An icy chill crawled over his body. As for Demijohn, he had all he could do to crush an ejaculation.

Dolan had dismounted and was kneeling in the bottom of the hollow. He knelt beside a lean, motionless figure that lay face down—the figure of the tall rancher, Rance Crawford!

Around Crawford's throat hung a noosed rope, and to the rope was affixed a slip of white paper. But it wasn't this which held Sam petrified. It was what Soapy Dolan was doing.

Dolan had lifted the dead man's hand. He was holding Crawford's finger as he might have held a pen-

cil. With that finger he was scrawling ungainly letters in the dust, long, irregular letters that might have been inscribed by a dying man to name his assailant. Though Dolan was about fifty yards away, the letters were so large that Sam, in horrified fascination, could not help seeing them clearly. They were:

S-A-M S-Q-U—

SAM turned his head to gape at Demijohn. But the latter was too stunned to be aware of the movement. He continued to watch Dolan.

What the rancher was attempting to do was unmistakable: he was telling the world—as though Rance Crawford himself had struggled to do it—that Crawford had been murdered by Sam Squam! Whoever found that body would report a circumstance from which there could be little hope of escape.

A sense of outrage so gripping caught Sam that he gritted his teeth, and his eyes flared. He half rose, intent on rushing down the slope to settle matters with Soapy Dolan once for all.

Then, at that instant, he heard a crackle of brush on the other side of the hollow.

Like Demijohn, he jerked up his head to gape. Another man was there. A man whom Dolan, too, suddenly saw. A man who stood boldly revealed on the hollow's rim, six-gun in hand, face hard and uncompromising. It was Len Foster of the Border Patrol.

Demijohn caught Sam's wrist in a restraining hold. "Stay where you are," the little man warned. "The law's got the jasper now! Let Foster handle this himself!"

Foster, apparently, had seen enough. He snapped up his weapon. Dolan, as ghastly as if he were confronting a specter, stumbled back from Crawford's body, his hand fumbling for his gun.

"Hold it!" Foster called dangerously. "Hold it, hombre! Stay where—"

But he made one mistake. In moving forward he stepped too close to the edge of the slope. Sand and gravel gave way under his boot. Not much of it, but enough to throw him briefly off balance. While he swayed, Dolan yanked out his gun and fired.

He shot three times in rapid succession. In the stillness the shots sounded peculiarly flat. One of the slugs found Len Foster's heart.

The Border Patrol fell crazily, in a series of somersaults, to the bottom of the slope. He must have been dead before he stopped falling. Yet Dolan evidently wanted to make sure. He sent another shot at the body.

That was when Sam could no longer restrain the madness in him. He lunged out of the brush. He raced down the slope, sliding, stumbling. Because fifty yards still lay between him and Dolan, he wasted no lead. But his six-gun was ready. His eyes blazed at Dolan.

This second attack, catching Dolan as unprepared as had the first, made him whirl around with a choked cry. There was still adhesive tape stretched across the bridge of his nose. His skin seemed to become as white as the tape and his eyes bulged. He fell back a few steps, his gun rising again. Then he realized that he did not have Sam alone to deal with. Up above, on the rim of the hollow, Demijohn was rising out of brush.

But Sam was nearer. Sam, in truth, was already in the bottom of the hollow, running straight toward

Dolan. Sam had to be coped with first. So Dolan fired.

Sam felt the bullet rip the leather of his holster. Dolan would have emptied his weapon at him, but Sam fired then, too. His aim was steady. He shot without compunction. And his bullet drilled Soapy Dolan's throat—a slug that killed.

CHAPTER XX

STRANGE SOLUTION

IT was gruesome there in the hollow, walking from one crumpled body to another. The sun beat down, hot and furious. Once a lizard slithered away from under Sam's shadow. Nothing else stirred, and the three men lay motionless within a few yards of each other.

The two men from the sheep ranch examined them all, with a sense of awe that verged on horror. Demijohn wiped a shaking hand across a wet forehead. He had forgotten the six-gun in his hand. Now, seeing it, he thrust it hastily into its holster.

"Holy cactus!" he whispered, his voice hoarse. "Holy cac-tus!"

Sam slowly rose from Len Foster's side. His legs felt stiff. Grimly he peered about at the other bodies, then shook his head.

"Demijohn," he said, "better mosey on an' bring the sheriff. This'll sure jolt him out of his hide."

But Demijohn only stammered, "D-doggone it, Sam, I still can't *sabe* why—"

"Go on. We'll do our guessin' when you bring Ingersol. Me, I'll keep the buzzards away."

"There's one thing, though," Demijohn cried with sudden passion, "that we finally got cleared up! Dolan's the polecat who's been committin' these rope murders! I don't know why or how he did it, but Dolan's the coyote we wanted!"

Sam stood still, frowning down at the thing that had been Soapy Dolan. "Think it was him, huh?"

"Don't *you?*" Demijohn demanded.

"I . . . I don't know."

"It stands to reason!" Demijohn argued. "We hear a shot. We streak over, an' there's Dolan hangin' over the dead man like a peckin' buzzard. Tryin' to make it look like *you* dry-gulched Crawford! He hated you like poison, Sam, 'specially since you busted his nose. Maybe this was his way o' hittin' back. He wanted—"

"Look at his boots, Demijohn."

"Huh?"

"His boots," Sam repeated quietly. "He ain't wearin' any rags on 'em, is he?"

"Why, no-o—"

"An' look at the marks around Crawford's body. Those same smudges we been seein' everywhere."

Demijohn stared. After a while he filled his lungs. "Doggone," he mumbled in wonder, "you think somebody else was here? Somebody with his feet tied up in rags? Somebody we missed again?"

"Reckon so," Sam said quietly.

There was a brief silence. An insect buzzed around them. Then Demijohn flung out, "If this killer gets away again—" He broke off. Abruptly he looked over at the body of the Border Patrolman. "Sa-ay, we could sort o' suspect *him,*" he said more slowly. "Only, if Foster had killed Crawford, he wouldn't hardly have come back to fight Dolan. He'd have sneaked away like the killer sneaked away after every killin'. There was no call to show himself. Besides, he ain't wearin' anythin' over his boots, either. No, Foster most likely heard

the shot the way we did. An' came to investigate, same as us."

"You go for the sheriff," Sam urged with sudden vigor. "We'll do our palaverin' when he comes."

So Demijohn started up the slope. Halfway to the top, however, he paused to look down at Sam with new lights in his eyes.

"Say!" he ejaculated. This sure changes everythin' up in our valley!"

"I was kind o' thinkin' o' that myself."

"With Dolan dead, there won't be anybody to fight us for that grass! No, sir! As for Slop, without a boss to back his play he won't have any interest in fightin' us up there. It sure changes the whole doggone situation! We'll get those cows out an'—"

"Get the sheriff," Sam repeated dryly. "We'll start celebratin' some other time."

TOWARD dusk that afternoon, Ruth Lenroot began packing her suitcase. She seemed to be working in a daze. There were tears in her eyes, and she bit constantly into her lip to hold back the sobs. Yet the sobs occasionally racked her, so that her whole slim body shook. And once she had to sit down, helpless and weak, to press hands to her face.

It was then that someone rapped at the door.

She looked up quickly. "Yes?" Her voice sounded strange and choked. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Sam."

The reply made her flinch as though it were a shot. She rose, confused, flushed. She felt miserable, and the misery trembled in her words.

"Sam, I . . . I can't see you now!"

"You got to," he said gravely.

"In a little while—tonight—"

"Look, Ruth." Through the door

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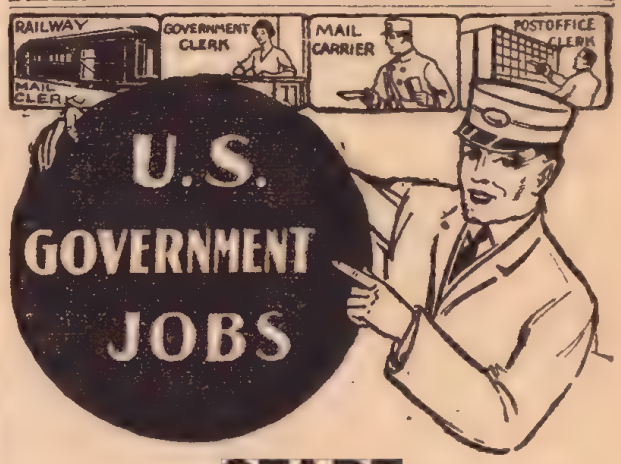

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he tried to make his voice reassuring. "I've found out a lot o' things. I got to tell the sheriff what I know, but I figured I'd rather talk it over with you first. Give me the chance, Ruth."

She hesitated a long time, her hand rubbing desperately over the back of a chair. At last she crossed the room impetuously. She unlocked the door, pulled it open.

Sombrero in hand, Sam entered without speaking. It was he who shut the door. Then he turned to look at her and saw a pale, lovely girl tortured by wretchedness. It hurt him just to gaze at her.

"You heard what happened this afternoon?" he asked quietly.

"Of course!" She brushed harassed hands together, and her eyes avoided his. "The whole town's been talking."

"You know that while Demijohn went for the sheriff I stayed alone with those three bodies?"

"Ye-es."

"Well, I rounded up their horses. Crawford's and Foster's were only a few hundred yards away."

Her gaze fastened itself on his now, with fear. She seemed to be holding her breath.

"I looked over Foster's horse plumb careful," Sam went on softly. "By that time I was wonderin' plenty if he'd just been around there by accident, like the rest of us. Know what I found hid under his saddle, Ruth?"

She sank to the bed shakily, as if her legs could no longer support her.

"Pieces of a burlap bag," Sam told her. "Dusty pieces. The rags Fosster tied around his boots whenever he didn't want to leave marks in the dust. He was Dave, wasn't he, Ruth?"

She sat unable to talk, her lips parted, her skin as white as the pillow on the bed.

After waiting a while, Sam said

gently, "He's dead, Ruth. We got to have the truth now. It can't hurt him any more."

He had an impulse to go to the girl and take her hands. He wanted to make her understand all the profound sympathy he felt and tell her she could count on him to stand back of her. But he merely said:

"I got a hunch you'll feel lots better if you tell me about it. Sort o' talk yourself out."

The very friendliness of his voice helped her recover some poise. He seemed blurred through the tears. Yet there was something in his manner that made confidences easy.

"It . . . it's a mad story, Sam," she whispered brokenly. "Absolutely mad!"

"Reckon it would be, considerin' all that happened."

"It began when . . . when Dave got into trouble up in Idaho a couple of years ago. He was suspected of being part of a bad crowd, gamblers, rustlers, what-not, and he couldn't get a job anywhere. So he changed his name to cut off the old connections and came south. As 'Len Foster' he got on the Border Patrol. Then—"

Here she faltered, tearing nervously at the handkerchief in her fingers.

"Then father was lynched. Dave heard about it. It poisoned his brain with fury. When the law failed to get the lynchers, he tried to have himself transferred to the Border post nearest Mesquite Flats. He . . . he swore he'd find those killers himself. It took him almost eight months to get the transfer. And as soon as he came he began working on the riddle of who'd lynched father.

"I'd get angry letters from him," she continued. "He was never afraid to write me just how he felt. Then, a couple of weeks ago, he wrote that he'd finally got a way of learning what he wanted to know. I told you, Sam, how his letter scared me. How I dropped everything and came here to stop him from doing anything crazy."

SAM let his fingers drum on the edge of the table. A queer, humorless smile tugged at his mouth. "Ruth, you wasn't exactly tellin' the truth when you claimed you hadn't set eyes on your brother around Mesquite Flats—though I can't say as I blame you much for holdin' that back."

"If I'd admitted it," she cried bitterly, "the town would have seized him, lynched him!"

"An' there's another thing," Sam added with more gentleness than censure. "That Mex you claimed you saw on the trail near Cal Gordon's body, you just sort o' made him up, didn't you? To get suspicion away from folks around here, includin' Dave, an' set it against some hombre who didn't exist?"

She nodded jerkily. Her eyes were still flooded.

"Well," muttered Sam, "they did catch a Mex smuggler on the Border on account o' that story—the gent you couldn't identify. I hear he was carryin' plenty o' contraband in his saddle pack—which was why he tried to vamoose an' even shoot it out when he was spotted."

"I know."

"Now tell me—" Sam put a hand under her chin and tilted back her head. He looked down into her eyes. "Did Dave ever tell you how he got the names o' the hombres who lynched your pa? Was it from Hopi Painter?"

"Yes," she whispered. Then she plunged on with the air of one dropping all restraint: "He told me

when we rode to the Border together to identify that Mexican! He said one night he happened to take Hopi home. Hopi was very drunk and started mumbling about the lynching he'd seen. But when Dave tried to pump him, he shut up quick. Dave worked on him for weeks before Hopi agreed to furnish the names of the lynchers at so much per name. He . . . he didn't tell about all of them at once. Dave didn't have enough money at one time. Hopi just said there'd been fifteen. And he sold just a name or two at a time, to be sure of his money."

Sam saw many things now. Principally he saw Dave Lenroot—the grim "Len Foster" of the Border Patrol—preparing and hiding fifteen noosed ropes for the men who had murdered his father. There had been a moral value in the things: after the first killing the other lynchers would be thrown into panic, knowing the signficance of the ropes, and this terror would be part of their punishment.

"The night I took Hopi home," Sam said quietly, "Dave must have known it and been scared—"

The girl caught his hand, squeezing it hard. Her voice became choked. "Sam, I . . . I can't tell you how awful I felt that night! You . . . you of all people being shot by Dave!"

"How'd he find out I went with Hopi?"

"Dave himself had been about to lead Hopi away from the saloon when Sheriff Ingersol saw him from my window. Ingersol was questioning me. He called Dave up, too. Dave must have told Hopi he'd be back in a minute. And when you started leading Hopi away, he probably took it for granted you were Dave."

"An' asked me for fifty dollars," Sam put in dryly.

"Dave galloped after you. He took a roundabout way to Hopi's place. He spoke to Hopi after you left and . . . and learned what Hopi had let slip. And because he didn't want that spread, he raced around to the oaks and tried to get you."

"How'd he find out I went to see Hopi the other night—the night Hopi was killed?"

"When he rode home from the Border with me, somebody told him —I don't know who—that you'd ridden toward the Dawson place. It scared him again. So—he tried to kill you."

It was hardly necessary to ask more questions; to torment the girl with them. Brows contracted, Sam mechanically rolled himself a cigarette. And his speculations returned to today's killings, to the carnage in the badlands hollow.

It was easy enough to imagine Foster, or Dave Lenroot—it was difficult to think of him as Dave—shooting Rance Crawford. Perhaps Soapy Dolan, on his way to the sheep ranch, had heard the shot and ridden to investigate. If Dave spied the rancher coming, he might also have seen Sam and Demijohn. No doubt he had realized that, with so

many eyes watching, it would have been impossible for him to escape from that territory unseen. So he had made the best of a bad situation; he had hidden his foot cloths and had boldly returned in his capacity of an officer of the law.

Sam sighed as he lit the cigarette. Through its smoke he gazed down at the girl.

"Reckon I better go tell all this to the sheriff, Ruth."

She rose instantly. "No, Sam! *I'll* tell him!" Determinedly she reached for her sombrero and started toward the door. I . . . I guess this is *my* job!"

TWO hours later, loping homeward with Demijohn in moonlit darkness, Sam Squam felt better than he'd felt in weeks. His spirit seemed released from a trap, and it soared. He couldn't help smiling up at the moon—a quiet, mysterious smile, as if there were things which only he and the moon could understand.

"Demijohn," he said suddenly, "I'm buyin' the sheep ranch."

The announcement almost threw the little man out of his saddle. When he recovered his wits, he demanded, "What you been drinkin', Sam?"

"Nothin'. I'm buyin' the ranch from Mrs. Lenroot. By an' by Ruth's comin' out. I . . . uh . . .

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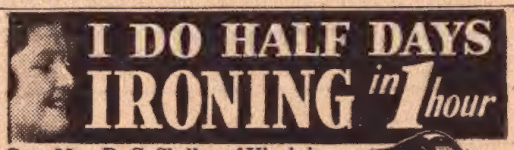

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that is, we kind o' talked things over just now, she an' me, an'—well—"

"Holy cactus, Sam!" Stunned, Demijohn reined in and stared. "Wh-what in thunder've you gone an' done now? Talked yourself into a *wife?*"

Sam grinned. "Yep," he confessed. "I . . . I sort o' felt it start-in' the first time I set eye on her." He leaned forward to stroke his palomino's neck. "I got to figure some way to buy her a piano, old-timer."

They rode on, presently, in a spell. The whole thing seemed as unreal as the fantastic moonlight around them. Time after time Demijohn looked incredulously at Sam's face, as if to assure himself all this was in earnest. At last the little man exclaimed, "Well, I'll be! Look, Sam!" He became mockingly indignant. "I ain't aimin' to stand by an' watch you grab *all* the pickin's!"

"Meanin'?"

"Awhile back, when the sheriff asked you not to start any fights in the valley till he got up, you told him all you wanted was a chance to bang a fist into Slop Jeffers' face!"

"Well?"

"Ain't you got pleasures enough, what with a ranch an' a wife? Don't you feel good as things stand?"

"I feel wonderful," Sam admitted.

"All right, then. Suppose you let *me* get somethin' out o' this mess, too! There's just one thing I want." Demijohn's voice rose. "When the time comes to smash a fist into Slop Jeffers' snoot, it's *my* fist, not yours, that does the job! *Sabe?*"

Sam chuckled. "All right, Demijohn," he agreed. "Reckon maybe you've earned that privilege."

"By thunder!" Demijohn's eyes glowed, and he rubbed his right fist with anticipatory delight. "Now, Sam, I feel wonderful, too!"

THE END

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